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INDEXING FOR A COMPUTERISED DATABASE

The Society's seminar 'New horizons in indexing' held at Northbrook House, Malvern, on Saturday 25 June 1988, was attended by 40 members. Topics included indexing of genealogical materials; indexing of community information; legal indexing; Viatel; indexing an historical picture collection; laser discs and pictorial indexing. Max McMaster, who spoke on computerised databases, summarises his talk in this article.

My paper covers indexing for a computerised database, in particular the type of bibliographic database you would find on say Australis, Dialog, Pergamon or any other of the major systems.

This type of indexing covers mainly journal articles, but can include conference papers, reports and chapters from books. In other words, the indexing tends to be article specific and in general reflects the overall theme of the paper, as distinct from book indexing where the indexing tends to be more subject or topic specific.

Most of the examples I will give are from CSIRO Index, the database with which I am most familiar. CSIRO Index contains some 50,000 records, representing the collective output of CSIRO staff from 1969 to the present. I must admit I haven't indexed all 50,000 records, having only been involved with the database for the past two and a half years.

Now in any indexing exercise for a computerised database there are three basic (and inter-related) aspects to be considered:

1. The audience

Users of CSIRO Index are mainly library and information staff from academic and research libraries, but increasingly the actual academics and researchers i.e. the end users, are doing their own searching.

The material included in CSIRO Index by its nature contains highly technical information, so it is essential to index the material at an equivalent technical level, in fact at the level specified by the author of the article. For example, it is not worth indexing an item on dodecylpeptides under the broad headings of 'chemistry' or even 'biochemistry' for CSIRO Index. The heading in this instance would be either the term 'dodecylpeptides' or possibly 'peptides' if warranted.

2. Vocabulary control

As with subject cataloguing, the need for consistency in indexing is paramount. As you are well aware, let three cataloguers loose on the same book and you can guarantee three different sets of subject headings will be generated. Indexers suffer the same difficulties as cataloguers and the only way of overcoming some of these problems is by using a controlled vocabulary or thesaurus. Thesauri come in many shapes and forms, and just about every subject discipline has its own range of them. CSIRO Index covers a full range of science and technology and consequently its thesaurus has to be similarly large. At present the thesaurus has approximately 30,000 terms and is growing continuously. Most of the terms have been extracted from other thesauri and then combined into a large hierarchical classification.
3. Content analysis

In indexing for a computerised database, terms can be taken directly from a thesaurus and used in their own right with no subheadings; alternatively, terms are chosen from thesauri and then free-term subheadings and sub-sub-heading are added as well. CSIRO Index follows this second approach.

Say we have a paper titled 'Preslaughter stress effects on toughness in beef'. To index this item satisfactorily, some keywords from the title can be used as starting points in the thesaurus; other terms will have to be thought of - the intellectual content of indexing. We would have entries such as:

- Beef cattle%preslaughter stress effects, meat toughness
- Meat toughness%preslaughter stress effects, beef
- Stress (Animals)%preslaughter condition effects, beef toughness

In this way, a composite picture of the article can be built up. To check the indexing for logical accuracy, the entries should be read in reverse sequence and the % sign (which is only included as a computer character) can be read as a backward reading OF or ON.

You may wonder why computerised indexing could not have been used. Certainly in this example it could, with only a slight loss of clarity in the item, as done in say Biological abstracts. However, notice the term 'stress' was qualified with the term 'animal' to distinguish it from plant stress, human stress which occurs in timber or in engineering applications. This is a relatively simple example but a couple of others I have found may be more difficult for the computer. 'Grazing behaviour of small herbivorous quadrupeds on phalaris pastures' - The animal to which this refers is not specified; it could cover sheep, goats or rabbits. (In fact, later on in the paper the author condescends to mention the paper is about sheep!) A second classic case is the paper on the aerodynamics of small white dimpled spheroids, which in fact is about golf balls.

Possibly with advances in artificial intelligence some of these problems can be overcome. The other option of course is to train authors to use simple terminology in the titles of their papers!

Max McMaster

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MORE ON THE AGPS STYLE MANUAL

I read George Levick's 'Indexing Chapter', Newsletter May 1987, as intending nothing more than a brief guide to someone who would read this chapter in the same way as the other chapters of The AGPS Style Manual would be read - no more. Some 35 years ago when I started in publishing (and later as an editor) I would have been grateful for the Style Manual (though over time I have developed my own skills and don't necessarily agree with everything in it). In the same way, I would have been grateful for the chapter on indexing.

I agree with George that an index should carry a note on the method of references (whether to pages or paragraphs), but I do not agree with some other things he says. Particularly I do not think that an index has to be preceded by an introductory note and that an explanation of the indexer's general policy is required; nor do I agree with the requirement that an index has to be acknowledged. (I qualify my statement by saying that there may be exceptional circumstances when one or more of these are required.
In these few matters I agree with Janet Hine Newsletter (August 1987), but not with all her other criticisms. I think Janet may have tried to read more than was (or should have been) intended or expected of the chapter. I did not, for instance, get the impression that George was issuing a 'state-of-the-art report', as Janet did. (Sadly I missed Mr Blackburn's contribution). I did not agree with Janet's comments on the topics of 'entries' and 'references' (to which she returned in March 1988). I understand an 'entry' (as George did) to compromise the heading, subheadings and (numerical) reference as a whole. The term 'reference' means that a reader's attention is directed to a particular page or paragraph in which the heading and subheadings are discussed in the text. Janet talks of 'entries ... plus citations' and I find this difficult. She appears to prefer 'citation' to 'reference'. The Concise Oxford dictionary indicates that these two words have quite different meanings and I prefer 'reference' in the context that George has used it. Janet also seems to differ on George's usage of see and see also cross-references. I can't see anything wrong with the way George attempted to instruct the reader of the Style Manual on how and when to use these terms.

There are a few things I would like to add about indexes. Mr Levick might perhaps have warned would-be indexers not to attempt to replace the text, by over-indexing. I do not agree with what appears to be common acceptance that an indexer must be led by the author or the publisher, so I do not quite understand what George means when he says that the scale of an index may vary. An index is an index; there is no such thing as a short index (which is probably what George refers to as an inadequate index). Fortunately I have not come up against a publisher who has set boundaries to an index, and if I do I will not be the indexer of that work. Anyone who knows anything about an index will agree that it is a necessary segment of a book, and as George says 'when a publication needs an index, do not publish without one'. A chapter of a book may be abbreviated but not so an index. A book may take up 100, 200 or more pages. An index to such a book (two column 8 pt type) may take up 6 to 8 pages. Often a publisher is looking for an additional page or two to complete an even number of 16-page or 8-page sections for economic printing. (Sometimes there is one too many, but this is not too difficult to deal with as preliminary pages can usually be rearranged). So, no short cuts to an index, other than perhaps to decide, at the outset, whether an index to the text is required in addition to an index of names.

I believe that a knowledge of the subject matter of the text is useful to produce a better index. For this reason specialisation is an advantage, but a substitute is to request an author, particularly the author of a technical or specialised subject matter, to look over an index. An indexer, however good or experienced, can make a mistake in the interpretation of a particular technical (or legal) term for example and give it an incorrect emphasis or place. There is, of course, no substitute for reading the text carefully, but I do not advocate reading at two stages as George suggests. I agree with Janet's comments.

I do not blame Mr. Blackburn for thinking that Janet preferred a manual system of indexing, but in her second article in Newsletter, March 1988, she emphasises her preference for technology. I agree, and at one time I explored the advertised software but did not find one to suit me. Generally, they have two levels of index and use a 'mark-text' technology, but in the subject matters in which I specialise (including law) this is not always suitable. One often deals with concepts in law and it is necessary to twist a phrase around to make up a subheading, so marking text is not all that useful. Three levels are often called for and at times even a fourth. I would like a system which does all this.
However, indexers who have a word processor may like to know that I use my PC for indexing (without any special software), in the same way as I use it for any other word processing task, whether I require one, two or three (or more) levels of entry. Having read my text and listed my main headings on the screen, I am ready. I use the return key and the tab key. The former is used to put space between the respective headings or subheadings to be entered where they arise in the text, and the tab key is used for indenting the subheadings. (If the tab key is not used indents do not always stay in place when the index is printed out). I thus fly up and down my two columns like a bee after yet another flower for its honey. I need no cards and I care not for slips of paper as Janet does, nor do I need special software. The work is a breeze.

Kingsley Siebel

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'DANCE AUSTRALIA' INDEX

Issues of 1 to 32 of Dance Australia have been indexed by a professional indexer and librarian with a lifetime experience in her craft. Jean Hagger, assisted by dance teacher Vivienne Dunn, did this work voluntarily as a service to the arts.

The academic study of dance has taken a great leap forward since Dance Australia was established. I can recall people including Ann Butt, Hanny Exner, Aldo Gennaro and Shirley McKechnie linking dance in a studied way with personal development and therapy, physical and mental health, philosophical aesthetics, general education and, above all, a deeper appreciation of the art form based on a more intelligent understanding of dance in all its aspects.

Now there are at least nine accredited tertiary faculties of dance in Australia and several other full-time dance courses that are arguably as good, if not better. There has been some reaction to this. Cynics say intellectualising has almost replaced dance in some places. But there is no doubt that Jean’s index will be an excellent reference tool for all students and devotees of the dance art.

From Dance Australia 36, June-July, 1988

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NOTES AND NEWS

Microindexer 9, December 1987, includes 'Electronic communication and bulletin boards' by Hilary Calvert and a review of CINDEX, software for professional indexers.

K.G.B. Bakewell discusses the main features of the revised British Standard 3700: Recommendations for the preparation of indexes to books, periodicals and other documents in Indexer vol. 16, no. 1, April 1988. This issue also includes Part 5 of 'Indexing and abstracting: a current awareness bibliography' by Hans Wellisch.
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The Society welcomes the following new members:

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Mrs J. Creswick
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We welcome contributions to the *Newsletter*. If you have any material you feel would be suitable for inclusion, please send it to the Editor, Australian Society of Indexers, G.P.O. Box 1251L, Melbourne, Vic. 3001, by Monday 29 August 1988.

Advertisements for publication in the *Newsletter* are now being accepted at the following rates:

- ½ inch block $5
- 1 inch block $10

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Closing date for next issue 29 August 1988