

So what do you do?

The answer “I am an indexer” to the usual occupation enquiry is pretty much guaranteed to stop a conversation stone dead. It is much easier to say ‘librarian’, which was on my passport for 20 years, or even ‘information scientist’, which I was trained to be. Sometimes I get quite defiant. I am an indexer, and yes a human actually does prepare those pages at the back of books, and no, it is not all done by computer.

Computers are wonderful things, and a dedicated indexing program helps me greatly. It can put entries into order, alphabetical, chronological, by page number or whatsoever I choose. It checks my spelling and can produce a plethora of layouts or fonts. But a beautiful layout does not an index make. The content, the intellectual input and the access it provides for the user makes an index. A computer can produce an index about as well as a word processor can write a book. If you want a list of all appearances of nouns within a text, do not mind being sent on wild goose chases around irrelevant mentions, and can put up with missing all the synonyms or concepts that are not actually put into words, then maybe a computer-generated concordance would suit you. You will appreciate, however, that the mammoth work of great scholarship described in the book introduction will produce a reference to a large hairy extinct pachyderm.

Throughout this article I have made extensive use of published works on indexing, yet have only skimmed the surface of the subject. For in-depth study I would direct readers to the books by Nancy Mulvany^{1} and Pat Booth^{2}, together with the Society of Indexers Occasional Paper No.2 ‘Indexing Legal Materials’

Index, meaning

Having made reference to what an index is not, let us move on to what an index is. Definitions abound, and the chronological advance is interesting. H.B.Wheatley in 1878 tells us “An index is an indicator or pointer out of required information” ^{3}. Mary Petherbridge in 1904 gives us “a summary of all statements and allusions contained in a book” ^{4} which though admirable is surely over enthusiastic, requiring an index as long as the original book. In both of these definitions there is no mention of structure or form. British Standard BS 3700:1988 described an index as “a systematic arrangement of entries designed to enable users to locate information in a document”. The current standard, BS ISO 999:1996, gives us “alphabetically or otherwise ordered arrangement of entries, different from the order of the document or collection indexed, designed to enable users to locate information in a document or specific documents in a collection” ^{5}. The defined index now has a systematic arrangement and a user.

Mulvany (1994 p.4) is clear and concise “An index is a structured system, resulting from a thorough and complete analysis of text, of synthesized access points to all the information contained in the text. The structured arrangement of the index enables users to locate information efficiently”. Pat Booth in the most recent indexing textbook, “refers to an organized (usually alphabetical) sequence of entries each of which can lead a user to the desired information within a document, or to the required document within a collection”. She emphasizes that ‘document’ denotes “any

information bearing item, such as a book, periodical article, report, image, audiotape, CD-ROM, or electronic file” (Booth 2001 p.2). The definitions now extend to structure, user and breadth of original material.

Booth also explains the relationship of contents lists to indexes. Chapter headings are indicative only of their content, and could even be misleading. Many law books have contents lists including chapter, section and paragraphs which indicate to the researcher the structure of the publication and the topic divisions in the order they appear in the text, but the index goes deeply into the text, identifying the topics, bringing together scattered references and presenting them to the researcher in a helpful order. The indexer can use the language of the user as well as the author. (Booth 2001 p.6-8)

Index, purpose

The index serves only one purpose: it enables readers to locate information efficiently. Thus spake Mulvany. (Mulvany 1994 p.5)

BS ISO 999: 1996 (para.4) goes into great detail as to how the indexer can achieve this aim: the indexer should identify and locate the relevant information, discriminating relevant from passing mentions of a subject which are excluded. To include all passing mentions is a waste of user’s time. The concepts should be analysed to produce a series of headings in appropriate language for the publication and the user. The actual wording chosen may or may not be in the text. Users seeking information under terms not chosen as headings should be directed to the chosen heading by *see* references. Relationships between concepts should be indicated by the heading/subheading status and by *see also* references. Information on a subject scattered by the arrangement of the document should be grouped together. The subject matter should then be arranged in a systematic and helpful order. We shall return to many of these points later.

Index, users

The definitions emphasized the importance of the user and the user’s needs. So who are these users? In our field they range from law students and librarians to Law Lords; from general readers, Citizens’ Advice Bureaux staff, local authorities and Members of Parliament to experienced practitioners. Law books are also studied with interest in the libraries of HM prisons. The language used in the index may vary depending on the intended user group. As student texts are expected to be read from cover to cover, their users should be familiar with the vocabulary of the author, while many of the large reference works are designed to be consulted only when needed. Mulvany distinguishes between “casual users”, who have time and patience, and “desperate users” who do not (Mulvany 1994 p.10-11). I imagine standing before a High Court Judge would constitute ‘desperate’.

Indexers must beware of indexing for other indexers, producing beautifully crafted works of art which impress but do not quite meet the user’s needs. A recent series of usability studies on indexes was undertaken by Susan Olason to establish a set of user requirements indexes need to satisfy. She studied reactions to layout differences, to alphabetisation of prepositions and to access paths, and was able to formulate a rule-

set for more user-friendly indexes {6}. Unfortunately, indexes have also to work within the publishers' house style so cannot necessarily implement these rules. So if you do not always like what you see in an index, fault may not lie with the indexer.

Index, indexers

So who are these creatures, usually anonymous although BS ISO 999: 1996 (para.6.4.4) says that publishers should offer indexers the opportunity to be named in the document, and what qualities do they possess? The Society of Indexers expects its members to have a good general knowledge and educational background with the ability to use English well, to spell and to recognize spelling errors, to copy accurately and to make correct use of punctuation, spacing and capital letters. They must be careful and methodical. Impartiality and objectivity are qualities that the professional indexer can bring that possibly an author cannot. They must be able to use judgment as to what is essential and what peripheral. Most members are graduates; in fact a survey in 1995 showed many had at least two qualifications. For subject specialisations a degree or advanced degree can become essential together with up-to-date knowledge of the discipline. They should have, or aspire to, training and qualifications in indexing, but more of that later.

Finally, they must be able to work under pressure, to meet deadlines. They must have skill with computer technology and Internet use, and increasingly, as freelance independent contractors, they must have business skills.

Why do they index? What are the joys? Amongst the routine there is creativity. There is the delight in finding a little gem of information previously unknown and now indispensable. There is the cerebral and logical challenge of making order out of a chaotic text. It is a thrill to see your name in print with an acknowledgement from a grateful author. And finally, there is freedom to work when and how you choose, or choose not. As librarians, when did any of you last refuse to issue a book or seek out a reference because, well, you just did not want to?

Index, author as indexer

The standard contract of many British publishers requires the author to provide the index. He could pay a professional indexer but many times attempts to produce it himself. Many authors make excellent indexers; they do know the subject matter better than anyone else {7}. BS ISO 999: 1996 (para.6.1), however, stresses that the indexer should be impartial and objective. For some authors, their very closeness to the subject matter makes it difficult to consider that many potential users are less well-informed. Few authors actually know how to index, and after months living a book, writing, rewriting, proof reading, amending, more proof reading etc. etc, is now the time to learn? (Mulvany 1994 p.22-4)

Index, language

In choosing index terminology the indexer has to consider both the reader who is familiar with the subject matter and language of the text and the user who has not read

the publication. For the former it is important to retain the language of the text; for the latter the indexer must anticipate the language choice. Usual practice retains the language of the text for headings, with the addition of many and varied access points leading via *see* references to the heading. Synonyms are dealt with in a similar way, and are common in multi-author works. Sometimes a controlled vocabulary using external taxonomies or authority files is imposed on the indexer, examples being from Betty Moys{8} and Christine Miskin{9}. These are used particularly for large works or those on-going over time, where more than one indexer is involved{10}.

Use of language in law indexes is discussed extensively in the literature and readers are advised to consult the section 'What makes legal indexing different' in Wellisch{11}, chapters 5 and 6 of *Indexing Legal Materials* {12} and Booth (2001 p.253-4)

Some examples of the use of language follow. There is specialist terminology, sometimes known as 'terms of art', with Latin and old French expressions, for example *ultra vires* and *autrefois convict* which are indexed as they given.

Phrasal terms (made up of three or more words) seem to be used in law texts more than other subjects {13}. They are preserved in full in headings as breaking up the term would destroy the sense. Examples of phrasal terms are: actual bodily harm; duty of care; trespass to the person.

Compound headings are used extensively in law publications. Examples of compound headings include: planning permission; contributory negligence; intellectual property; employment contract. Depending on the publication it may be necessary to add directions to the user for example negligence, contributory *see* contributory negligence; or contracts, *see also individual types of contract e.g.* employment contract.

Individual words present difficulties too. Legal meaning can differ from general usage for example "distress" and "consideration". Extreme caution should be taken when using the word "caution" which has three separate legal meanings; a formal caution, reading a suspect his rights and a land charge. Such homographs would need differentiating, usually by a description in parenthesis, for example, prescription (medical) and prescription (rights).

Customary practice for headings is to use plurals when dealing with persons or definite solid (countable) objects (judges, contracts) but singular words when dealing with abstract concepts (causation, malice, negligence). There are always exceptions where singulars and plurals have completely different meanings (damage/damages, charge/charges)

A final thought on the number of words. Lawyers need a considerable number of words to ensure precision and accuracy in documents, whether they are wills, conveyances, contracts or opinions. Indexers, however, need to use the minimum number of words which will satisfactorily describe each of the subjects which is to be included in the index{14}.

Index, prepositions

Indexers have difficulties with prepositions. Some argue endlessly over them. Some should get out more! Historically indexes have been festooned with the beasties. If we use them, where do we put them? BS ISO 999:1996 (para.7.2.2.5) says they should as far as possible be used only if their absence might cause ambiguity. So 'information, disclosure of' can become, without loss of meaning, 'information, disclosure'. But what would 'disclosure, employer' mean? It could be disclosure by, to or about the employer. Having established that we need prepositions in this case, where do we put them? Do we use 'disclosure, by employer' or 'disclosure, employer, by', and how do we alphabetise the subentry? Would the user want to look for the subheading under 'by' or 'employer'? If it is 'employer', then where does the indexer put the 'by'? Personally I prefer to have the subheading as 'by employer' but ignore the preposition when sorting the subheadings, considering 'employer, by' to look old-fashioned. Susan Olason {6} in her survey described earlier, showed that users found sub-entries with prefix words reduced their user-friendliness by half, causing frustration because the entry had to be read rather than scanned and confusion because of difficulty with sort order. Users did not realise that prepositions were ignored in the sort. Perhaps I should reconsider my preference. Betty Moys cleverly sidestepped this problem by substituting alternative concepts for prepositions. Thus 'gifts, from x' or 'gifts, to y' becomes 'gifts, donors' and 'gifts, recipients' (Moys 1993 p.51)

Index, classified or specific

This is another topic on which indexers disagree: classified indexing, where the headings and numerous sub and sub-sub headings reflect the traditional divisions of the subject material (tort-negligence-causation-omission), or specific indexing, which gives direct entry under the term chosen for the heading. G. Norman Knight did not like classification in an index {15}. He considered that each indexable subject should have its own individual entry and that if classification were carried to its logical conclusion the result would be only one main heading (the subject of the book) and all further contents would follow as sub-entries, sub-sub-entries, sub-sub-sub-entries ad infinitum (Knight 1979 p.19, 96-100). Mulvany (1994 p71-5) and Booth (2001 p.254-5) are not so negative.

Legal materials have traditionally used a classified structure arranging the headings into a limited number of hierarchies. Many of the well-established practitioner books have been on going for over a hundred years as. it would seem, have many of the users! They know these books and how to use the classified index, and the publisher changes it at his peril. The index has to provide for these users, and also those who want to go directly to the information as a main heading (specific index). Fortunately law publishers appreciate the importance of the indexes, and rarely enforce space constraints, so it is usually possible to double or treble post entries. Thus, the classified tort entry would generate another main heading for 'negligence' with all its subentries, a further main heading for 'causation' with subentries, and finally an entry for 'omission', possibly with subentries. That is acceptable for large practitioner books where space is not an issue.

Smaller books, student texts for example, would have to be treated differently. The modern student wants to get straight to the information, not scroll through the

classified structure. Space is not unlimited, double posting not possible. If tort is the subject of the book, it does not need a main heading. 'Negligence' would be a main entry with subentries including 'causation *see* Causation'. 'Causation' would be a main heading with subentries including 'omission' either with page numbers or, if more than 5 locators, a further '*see* Omissions'.

Betty Moys, in her paper presented to the Australian Society of Indexers, thought that lawyers were not quite so wedded to tradition as is sometimes thought, and that the trend is definitely away from the classified structure. She hoped that indexers and publishers would insist on good specific entry indexes so that all readers, including lawyers, could find what they need quickly and easily {16}

Index, sorting

Index entries are usually in alphabetical order. BS ISO 999:1996 (para.8.2) specifies that headings of more than one word should be filed by the word-by-word method in which a space files before a letter (New York before Newark) unless continuing an existing index in letter-by-letter arrangement where spaces or dashes are ignored. Not all indexers agree with the British Standard recommendation (Mulvany 1994 126-7)

Particularly in biographies or history texts, subentries may usefully be sorted chronologically.

Pat Booth explains clearly the treatment of numerals in an alphabetical sequence (Booth 2001 p.163-5). In law indexes numbers tend to be dates of legislation. Companies Act 1985 would precede Companies Act 1989 as index main headings, as subheadings Limitation, 1963 Act would precede Limitation, 1980 Act

Tables of statutes and secondary legislation are ordered either alphabetically or chronologically, depending on the publisher's house style. There are occasions when deviation from strict order would be helpful. Consider the County Court Remedies Regulations 1991 and their subsequent amendment, the County Court Remedies (Amendment) Regulations 1995. Alphabetical order would put the latter first, common sense would do otherwise.

Index layout

Indexes are displayed in either of two forms, set-out (US indented style) or run-on (US run-in). In set-out format each subentry begins on a new line with indentation to show the subordination. The result is clear, allows for many levels of subheadings, but is space intensive. An example of set-out layout would be as follows

contracts
 Hague Rules, 230
 privity of contract, 228-9
 subcontractors, 235-9
 claim against, 235
 transferred loss, 232-4

Run-on layout has subheadings continued on the same line as the heading, with subordination indicated by punctuation. Only one level of subheading is possible. There is considerable space saving over the set-out arrangement. An example of run-on layout follows.

contracts; Hague Rules, 230; privity of contract, 228-9; subcontractors, 235-9; transferred loss, 232-4

Susan Olason's survey^{6} showed that users found the set-out much more useful than run-on layout which was never considered user-friendly, caused frustration about being forced to read rather than scan, confusion about sorting and confusion about which page reference went with which page entry. Obviously the space saving comes at a cost in usefulness. Detailed discussion on set-out and run-on layouts can be found in Mulvany (Mulvany 1994 p.184-7) and Booth (Booth 2001 p.169-71)

Index, supplementary

Librarians dislike supplementary indexes to looseleaf publications. Any search has to be done twice, through the main index, and then the supplement for additional material. The supplements rarely show material that has been deleted, so some of the main index may no longer be current. It would be wonderful to have a new main index with each release. Maybe librarians should lobby the publishers. That said, updating the indexes to looseleaf publications provides me with an excellent regular income.

Training in indexing

The techniques of indexing can be acquired in many ways, besides that single lecture at library school. Some indexers teach themselves from books and journals, some publishing houses hold in-house courses. The Society of Indexers (UK and Ireland) runs a distance learning course and workshops. Other training providers include training organisations, academic institutions and freelancers.

The Society of Indexers course, now in its third edition, consists of four printed units covering:

- A- Indexers, users and documents
- B-Choice and form of entries
- C-Arrangement and presentation of indexes and thesauri
- D-The business of indexing

Completion of an index under supervision is likely to also be required. An on-line interactive version should be available by the end of the summer (2002). Each unit has its own formal test, and workshops, telephone advice and tutorial support at extra cost are available to help candidates reach the required level to pass the tests. Successful completion of all tests leads to the status of Accredited Indexer of the Society.

Indexers are encouraged, after experience in commercial indexing, to apply for Registration. A Registered Indexer is regarded by the Society as having reached the

highest professional standard. Further details of Society of Indexers course and qualifications are available from the Society website www.indexers.org.uk/.

CPD (continuing professional development) is particularly important for indexers working alone. With no peer review and little feedback from publishers, they risk getting out of date. Working on cutting edge publications is an excellent way of keeping up to date with the indexer's own specialist subject, but indexing skills can also grow stale. Internet mailing lists, meetings with other indexers, the Society of Indexers now has many regional-based groups, and conferences are excellent sources of fresh ideas. They also provide an introduction to the most wonderfully eccentric folk.

- 1, Nancy C. Mulvany *Indexing Books* The University of Chicago Press 1994
- 2, Pat F. Booth *Indexing: The Manual of Good Practice* K.G.Saur 2001
- 3, H.B.Wheatley *What is an Index?* (1878)
- 4, Mary Petherbridge *The Technique of Indexing* (1904)
- 5, BS ISO 999: 1996 'Guidelines for the content, organisation and presentation of indexes'
- 6, Susan C. Olason 'Let's Get Usable' *The Indexer* Vol 22 No.2 October 2000 p.91
- 7, Mary Piggott 'Authors as their own indexers' *The Indexer* Vol 17 No.3 April 1991 p161-6
- 8, Elizabeth M.Moys *Moys Classification and Thesaurus for Legal Materials* K.G.Saur 2001 4th edition
- 9, Christine Miskin *A legal Thesaurus* (1999) Legal Information Resources
- 10, B.Symondson 'The Consolidated Index to Law Reports' *The Indexer* Vol 18, No.2 October 1992 p79-82
- 11, Hans H.Wellisch *Indexing from A to Z* 2nd ed H.W.Wilson 1996
- 12, Elizabeth M. Moys (ed) *Indexing Legal Materials* Society of Indexers Occasional Paper No.2 1993
- 13, Elizabeth M. Moys, 'Legal vocabulary and the indexer' *The Indexer* Vol 18, No.2 October 1992 p.75-8
- 14, Elizabeth Moys 'Open letter to an aspiring lawyer/indexer' *Brief Entry* No.1 April 1996
- 15, G. Norman Knight *Indexing, the Art of* George Allen and Unwin 1979
- 16, Elizabeth M. Moys 'Classified v. specific indexing; a re-examination in principle' *The Indexer* Vol 20 No.3 April 1997 p135-55