Bias in indexing and loaded language

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ABSTRACT: Indicates the betrayal of subjective opinion in indexing in five classes: reinforcement of the opinions of the author; deliberate interpolation of the attitudes of the indexer; rigid classification systems' imposing assumptions; the selection of terminology implying attitudes; and suppression of ideas from the text in the index. Most important and pervasive is the selection and limitation of language.

We may hope that our work is purely objective, freed by our professional integrity and the standardization of terms from the introduction or promotion of our own values in an index. I hope to show that there have in fact been bias and prejudice in indexing ever since William Prynne was pilloried, fined £5,000 and lost his ears for scurrilous denunciation of actresses in his index to Histrio-mastix of 1633, and Lord Macaulay, who 'knew an author's own words might be turned against himself', wrote to his publishers, "Let no damned Tory make the index to my History".

Bias and subjectivity in indexes seem to arise from five possible sources.

Authorial attitudes

First, strong opinions may feature in the author's actual text, and be lovingly reflected or reinforced in the index—particularly if this is compiled by the author, who seizes the opportunity to further his cause. Hill Burton, in The Book Hunter, states plainly that a controversialist, 'after exhausting his weapons of attack in the preface, and in the body of the book, if he is very skilful may let fly a few Parthian arrows from the Index'. And a character in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, Cat's cradle, declares, 'It's a revealing thing, an author's index of his own work'.

A. P. Herbert, in the index to his own Bardot M.P.? and other misleading cases (Methuen, 1964) enthusiastically trumpets:

Authors:
- barbarously used in; life in death
- generous natures abused
- get nothing out of Arts Council
- sacrificed to Privileged Libraries

We do not know who indexed the Introduction to Shaw's collected Prefaces, published by Constable in 1934, but deeply suspect the hand of GBS. The style and assertions are deliberately and familiarly lovingly reflected or reinforced in the index—particularly if this is turned against himself—wrote to his publishers, "Let no damned Tory make the index to my History".

We may perhaps call this an example of indexing, all in the family.

A fictitious example of autobiographical prejudice is offered by Robertson Davies, one of whose characters in The world of wonders (Macmillan of Canada, 1975) tells an enemy, 'When your autobiography comes out! shall look for myself in the Index under S and C "Squirts I have known, Mungo Fetch", and "Climbers I have encountered, Fetch, M."'

The feminist Dale Spender quite deliberately undertook to 'work out a new conceptualisation' in the index for her own Women of ideas, on the grounds that 'conventional indexes make women's experience and priorities invisible'. She claimed, in a letter to her sister:

We have some superb categories . . . we have fiddled with some of the patriarchal assumptions—the heading 'Economics' is immediately followed by 'Female, (sexual economics)' and contains the subheadings Failure to get a man, lucky to get a man, trading one's person (marriage and prostitution').

More examples of this consciously provocative and partisan indexing can be found in The Indexer of April 1987. I would regard it as good fighting feminism but bad biased indexing.

Intrusive indexers

My second class of bias in indexing is that deliberately introduced by the indexer, presumably unwarranted, and certainly to be condemned. The indexer can chiefly intrude his own prejudices in the degree of detail and amount of space accorded different characters in the index. A favourite, or one found by the indexer particularly interesting, may have every minor entry elaborated with glowing, verbose subheadings; while those not enjoying favour in the indexer's sight are dismissed merely with a string of undifferentiated page references, the less important perhaps omitted altogether. One criterion of good indexing is that the weight of importance given topics in the index should correspond to that of the text.

We must resist temptation to make jocular insertions indicating our value-judgments: most unprofessional, of course. Into this category comes the famous line interpolated by the indexer-daughter of the author of Nelson's textbook of pediatrics, 'Birds, for the, Pages 1-1413', retained knowingly through a dozen reprintings. Author-publisher Hunter Davies writes of inserting into the index of his own Guide to the Lake District, after Dove Cottage and Duddon, 'Dwnp-see Barrow'.

I found an extraordinary example of an indexer trumpeting ideas not in accordance with the text in the original version of a sociological book whose index I was revising for the second edition. The text was liberal in outlook and critical of government policy, but outdone entirely in attitudes derogatory to the establishment by the index, which seemed quite unbalanced. Two particular entries showed subheadings selected with most unprofessional relish:

Home Office: defence of use of drugs; judgment against in European Court of Human Rights; 'lack of leadership'; 'out of touch'; and prison department; refusal to transfer Irish prisoners to Northern Ireland; secrecy and misinformation Strangeways prison; military training of officers; National Front membership of officers; overcrowding; study facilities lacking

I substituted less judgmental terms, leaving the text to make its own political points:

Home Office, in prison system; and Board of Visitors; dismisses visitor; and drugs in prisons; and Human Rights Court; and information; and Irish prisoners; and medical service; and Open University

Strangeways prison; officers; overcrowding; study facilities
Impression by classification

The two types of bias described above are introduced deliberately in accordance with the opinions of the author or indexer. A third sort seems to me to be imposed by the use of standardized terminology, thesauri or subject structures, by which subjects are assigned to predetermined headings, rather than new, specific ones being devised. An official publication that I used to index had a rigid classification scheme, with almost Orwellian overtones. Anything to do with warfare or weaponry had to go under either ARMS CONTROL or DEFENCE ('Peace, Ministry of'); radiation under the single heading, ENVIRONMENT AND POLLUTION CONTROL; AIDS under HEATH. Less idealistic seemed the conjunction of ideas in one group heading, RACE RELATIONS AND IMMIGRATION. Passport regulations and statistics belonged together with control of race riots; a causal connection implied in the index rather than in the text.

It is even suggested in Iris Murdoch’s novel of 1954, Under the net (Chatto & Windus) that too broad generalization must be essentially untruthful:

It was as if his very mode of being revealed to me how hopelessly my own vision of the world was blunted by generality... Hugh noticed only details. He was never classified. He 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...

Linguistic limitation

Social embarrassments

The fourth class of bias in indexing causes the greatest difficulty, and is encountered in narrative, humanities indexing rather than technical. It is a question of the terminology available to describe human life and relationships: the limitations of the ideas that can be expressed, particularly as our language evolves more slowly than society changes. A number of terms I have felt the need of when indexing are simply lacking. Social problems are exposed occasionally in the media, as parents wonder how to refer to or introduce the non-married life and love partners of their children. With modern biographies, more and more one requires such terms for glosses in the index. So easy to explain, (wife of MC), (second wife of MC), or to provide subheadings, 'marries BB', 'marries CC', 'marriage', 'relations with wife'. When the ceremonies have been omitted, what terms do we use? Ours not to censor or condemn, but (first mistress), (second mistress), (women seduced by), may appear the only accurate terms available. When women are referred to only by their forenames in the book, as recurrent background figures, we may well want to include them in the index, but must either demand the surnames from the author–these having presumably been deliberately withheld, so unlikely to be divulged for indexing purposes–or, if indexing them just as ‘Jane’, ‘Mary’, we do need explanatory glosses–and all we can put is (mistress of MC). And how should we describe forename-only terms not occurring during those seven pages. If they are entered there, as wished, with a cross-reference from D, then logically, all types of people in the book should go under P with cross-references. In the index, we cannot use the subtle, probably lengthy, desired term, because we are seeking the most concise ones and the ones most likely to be sought by readers — different criteria from those of the author, and, maybe, of the subject of the text.

Political implication

Loaded language is equally difficult to deal with in political or sociological — even historical–texts. The choice of term may imply judgment between alternative principles or policies. Do we write of Vietnamese refugees or boat people? Terrorists or freedom fighters? Possible choices may forfeit neutrality. Does one refer to race riots thus, or as Street violence, or how? References in them to the — demonstrators? protestors? rioters? crowd? mob? hooligans? — and the forces of control can betray allegiance and allot approval or condemnation. One term must be chosen, and none is value-free. The pen is mightier than the sword— and the 5 x 3" than the pen?

Tell ing subheadings

Terms used in main headings usually can simply follow the text, being picked out and copied exactly. It is in the summaries provided by the indexer in subheadings, perhaps chiefly in narrative indexing, that we must provide our own terms; and it is here that bias shows. Who records history: minuting is power, providing the version of events that will be recalled and accepted: and the wording of subheadings is likely to be original, giving our own interpretation of the text rather than quoting from it; indexer becomes author, and our terminology indicates our assumptions. I find all the main problems of indexing to arise from subheadings, which we must devise, rather than main headings, which we merely have to arrange — a technical matter. Let me put it this way..., we insinuate in our subheadings.

The index to Elizabeth Longford’s 1976 biography, Byron, holds a nicely contrasting pair of subheadings conveying point of view. Under Byron, George Gordon, 6th Lord, we find ‘his courtship and marriage, 60–79”; while under ‘Byron, Annabella, née Milbanke, wife of B’, part of that passage is indicated by ‘vicissitudes of her marriage, 71–7’ — a term not occurring during those seven pages.

Assumptions are also made about our readership in our choice of language: ornithology or bird-watching; german measles or rubella. Our ideas of the level of age, intelligence, and education of the readers are betrayed by such choices.

Sexism

The most usual problem of linguistic restraint and control, patriarchal sexism as in ‘The author should contact his indexer’) I have never found a problem in indexing: our staccato telegraphese does not admit the use of pronouns. Feminism must intrude, though, in the decision as to how to index women who have been married—is our true name/identity the one we grew up with, or the one assumed on marriage? The relinquishment of the original name does give rise to strong feminist issues. Standardizing practice, so that either all women must be under maiden name or all under married, seems to give precedence to status over individuality. With a run of three or so women of the same surname, it seems helpful to indicate which started life with that name, which assumed it by marriage; yet the suffixes, Miss, Mrs. or gloss (wife of X), are sometimes seen as belittling. Née Smith may be quite superfluous information, if Smith does not occur in the book,
and may even need special research to determine. It does seem that marital status needs indication – Ms will never do in an index.

**Supressio veri**

In the case described above, indexing the family with unnamed mistresses and illegitimate grandchildren, I sent the index to the publisher with a letter explaining all these problems and the solutions I had tried; the various ladies listed by forename only with glosses, (mistress of XX), and the subheads of the son, asking that the author should be consulted about them. I heard no more; but when the book was published I saw that a sweeping, simple solution had been imposed-all the surname-lacking women were omitted from the index, and the difficult page in the son’s entry was subsumed in the simple subhead, ‘adult’. Do we regard this as justified censorship?

Suppression of textual matter in the index is a fifth form of bias. It may arise inadvertently, from too little space being accorded the index, that selection for inclusion must be over-rigorous. It may be benign, due to tact and delicacy, as in the case above, or as when one author struck out subheads from an index of mine referring to some folly on the part of his colleagues, telling me it was bad enough to have exposed it once, in the text, without drawing further attention to it! Or the fear of libel may cause us not to repeat in the index possibly actionable matter in the text. We may be legally liable for repeating libellous matter in the text, without drawing further attention to it! Or the fear of libel may cause us not to repeat in the index possibly actionable matter in the text. We may be legally liable for repeating libellous assertions from the text- even unknowingly and in good faith-or just for indicating where scurrilous allegations are to be found: we are messengers, and may be duly shot.

A Canadian indexer, Eve Gardner, reported disturbingly in the *IASC Bulletin* of November 1989:

“A publisher refused to accept an entry for ‘Opium’ in a social studies book that dealt with the 19th-century opium trade in China. The draft index was returned with the heading crossed out in red pencil. ... The publisher subsequently stated that opium should not be referenced in the index because ‘it would just get the kids excited’. The subject was handled very well in the text and at some length; but the publisher insisted and the heading was removed.”

This is surely a very serious example of bias - strict censorship - imposed on an index, separately from the text, and not by the author nor indexer. Let us hope it is rare. It involves another issue currently concerning us- whether we hold the copyright to our own indexes, and enjoy the ‘moral right’ accorded to authors, not to have their work detrimentally tampered with according to the bias of a third party.

**Conclusions**

Of these five types of bias, the deliberate ones are of course the easiest to recognize and deal with. It is the inadvertent suggestion of assumptions by classification systems or restricted terminology that seem to me the most insidious, difficult to avoid, even perhaps to recognize.

Linguistic limitation can best be combated by deploying the widest, most sensitive vocabulary, and I would suggest dictionaries and *Roget’s thesaurus* as the most essential reference books for narrative indexers, to seek out the most precise terms and be aware of all their implications. I use thesauri of vocabulary only to find what terms are available: never to know what are preferred by compilers who have not read the book I am working on – I prefer my own terms.

Indexers should certainly strive to maintain a fine impartiality. We can ensure that we allot space and emphasis in the index strictly in proportion to the importance accorded to topics in the text, and eschew introducing fresh matter expressing our own opinions. Our job is to indicate where in the text opinions are to be found, not to reiterate, reinforce or oppose them.

Like the soul in Tennyson’s ‘Palace of Art’, we must ... sit as God,

Holding no form of creed but contemplating all.

We cannot, though, compose our indexes of the neutral, nonjudgmental terms necessary for true impartiality, if, in the language which must be our medium, these do not exist.

**References**

4. See Have you heard the one about ... The *Indexer* 14 (4) April 1984, 77.

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