



Oh Brave New World, That Has Such Indexers In It!

David Crystal

When, in 2999, the next millennial indexing anthology comes to be written, they will look back at our own time with respect. For it will be the period when indexers emerged from their Dark Ages. Previously monochromatic inhabitants of a book's nether regions, dwellers in an ancillary world of add-on volumes, occasional issues, and loose-leaf inserts, and resigned to being omitted, curtailed, or ignored, the 21st century offered a new era of world presence. Indexers to the front, in colour, with flashing lights, always unmissable, never omissible.

Not in books, of course. On screens. Look at the Internet search engines now, and you are presented with an indexer's world – though often hardly recognizable because of its amateurishness. It will not take you long to spot every error in indexing practice. You will howl at the lop-sided commercially-driven idiosyncrasies of the knowledge classifications used to provide ways of accessing Web data. But, at the same time, the recognition that at last people have discovered the importance of explicit, up-front systems of information retrieval must send a satisfied nod around the chins of every true-born indexer.

There are amazing opportunities here, within this rapidly growing domain of 'knowledge management'. And a crying need for orthodox indexing practice and experience – the kind of awareness which can come only from knowing the pitfalls of indexing specialist areas. Every topic which *The Indexer* has ever dealt with is here writ large – and complicated by the fact that Web pages may be in any language (over 500 there now) and provide entry into vast databases, which may of course have been indexed already. The Web is a vast exploratory domain for the field which may one day be called 'comparative indexology'.

The indexer's discipline proves to be a lifeline when working in uncharted territory. And no territory has ever been so uncharted. It is also a territory where traditional indexing expectations can be



turned upside down. Can you imagine a situation where, in compiling a book index, the indexer deliberately decides to pay special attention to one chapter, at the expense of others? Or to one topic, at the expense of others? Or decides not to index one section of the book because (s)he doesn't approve of it? Or adds a series of new headings, without reference to the author, in order to catch your attention? Or adds some personal material about the indexer's likes and dislikes? Or introduces a private code system to convey hidden meaning in the index?

No Wheatley Medal here, one imagines. But all of this is part of the daily reality of those who currently encounter the Web. The search engines themselves choose their priorities, on their lead-in pages. The influence of advertising is everywhere. Some topic areas, or individual entries, are selected for special treatment, and their key words are more prominent, through colour or animation. It's a bit like seeing, in the middle of letter B, an index entry winking at you. Or having an 'X see Y' entry sponsored by Heineken.

Of course, once authors of Web pages realize that there is a game to be played, they play it. I recall once doing a search for Hamlet, and finding a poem called 'Hamlet Hamlet Hamlet Hamlet Hamlet'. This is not because the author was writing about Hamlet, or anything Shakespearian, or making a connection with that world, but simply so that anyone who searched for 'Hamlet' on the Web would find his poem at or near the top of the search. This is because of the simple word-frequency algorithms search engines use when processing a search request. Poor old Shakespeare only used the name once in his title. He's on a hiding to nothing.

More worryingly, those who peddle porn do the same sort of thing. To avoid the traps set by the server companies (who look out for the more obvious vocabulary of sex, and deny access to a site if it contains it), porn merchants have begun to appropriate 'harmless' words. A recent search for one famous novelist, for example, included a porn site, which had deliberately given itself the name of the novelist. Another used the name 'whitehouse'. By such accidental encounters do such operations increase their membership.



Society of Indexers

All of this is indeed a new world, for the traditional indexer – coping with hypertext links, relating index entries to classified domains, devising sensible techniques of search assistance, coping with procedures of censorship, implementing new codes of practice. But it is a world which must be embraced, because the need for professional indexing is as urgent when the pages are electronic as when they are paper. It is indeed a brave new world, and if it is to function efficiently it must have indexers in it.