

Ethical places, ethical spaces: stopping to listen

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Christine Jacobs reflects on how ethical considerations affect the work of the indexer. What does 'ethics' mean? How does it affect the indexer's choice of what to index and how? What if the indexer finds the subject matter uncongenial or badly presented? How does the indexer remain alert to perspectives other than his or her own? How does one guard against bias and achieve neutrality of language? To whom does the indexer owe responsibility?

There is very little written specifically on how indexers formulate their philosophical frameworks. I assume that many have simply developed principles over time as they gained experience and coped with dilemmas. I hope that the following outline of some of the types of issues I have noted over the years will stimulate more discussion among practitioners about how they envision the frameworks underlying the process of indexing.

I have worked in a variety of capacities and in a variety of settings – books, films, databases, library catalogues, thesaurus construction – for government agencies, libraries, individual authors, scholarly presses and commercial presses. From time to time I have been faced with making decisions that have relied not so much on my knowledge of indexing practices, but on my moral beliefs about what should be done. I have struggled with trying to index in a manner that seemed right, just, fair, respectful, and to extend my personal and professional belief systems into my working life in a coherent manner. Thus my own guiding principles have evolved during interactions with clients/employers, users and the actual materials being indexed. I have had to stop, recognize and pay attention to places of conflicting understandings and obligations in order to extend my sense of professional ethics.

What exactly is meant by the word 'ethics'? There is considerable variation in definition – a real indexer's nightmare, but the following will serve as a useful departure for discussion.

The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines ethics as:

1 plural but singular or plural in construction: the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation

2 a: a set of moral principles or values **b:** a theory or system of moral values <the present-day materialistic ethic> **c:** plural but singular or plural in construction: the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group <professional ethics> **d:** a guiding philosophy

Dictionary.com's definitions are slightly different:

1.a: A set of principles of right conduct. **b:** A theory or a system of moral values: 'An ethic of service is at war with a craving for gain' (Gregg Easterbrook).

2: ethics (used with a sing. verb) The study of the general

nature of morals and of the specific moral choices to be made by a person; moral philosophy.

3. ethics (used with a sing. or pl. verb) The rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession: *medical ethics*.

The points in common among the different definitions focus on moral values, principles, governing of conduct, and guiding philosophy.

Two other points should help clarify the discussion:

1. An index is a map, not a list of words, and the processes inherent in creating this map include analysis, categorization, classification, translation, knowledge representation, synthesis, etc. Whether it is a back-of-the book index, a collection of photographs on the Web, a library catalogue, or the construction of a taxonomy, a good indexer will bring similar processes into play as the items are analyzed and the concepts represented in words.
2. Good will on the part of the indexer is assumed. The issue of indexers choosing of their own volition to suppress or twist information with malice aforethought, although it undoubtedly does happen from time to time, will not be addressed here.

Thinking effectively about ethics requires critical self-reflection. As indexers, where do we need to be vigilant, what kinds of choices must we make that require us to use our ethical guidance systems? I would suggest that the following locations of practice can give us some guidance (not ranked according to importance):

1. Information ethics – the BIG picture.
2. Business practices.
3. What to index?
4. Analytical perspectives/world views.
5. Vocabularies, maps and naming choices.
6. Responsibilities to the subject(s).
7. User needs.

Information ethics – the BIG picture

According to the International Center for Information Ethics, the field of information ethics explores and evaluates:

- the development of moral values in the information field,
- the creation of new power structures in the information field,
- information myths,
- hidden contradictions and intentionalities in information theories and practices.

(ICIE, 2006)

Indexers need to be aware of the broader issues concerning information storage and access so that we can think critically about our daily work – how we conduct ourselves, interact with our employers/clients, and accommodate the needs of the users of our products.

Article 2b of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* states that everyone has the fundamental **freedom of:**

thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication
(Canada 1982; bold mine)

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the:

Article 18. Right to **freedom of thought**, conscience and religion

Article 19. Right to **freedom of opinion and expression**

Article 20. **Entitlement to** the realization of economic, **social and cultural rights** indispensable for dignity and the free development of personality

Article 26. Right to **education**

Article 27. Right to **participate in the cultural life** of the community, to **enjoy the arts and share in scientific advancement**

(United Nations 1948; bold mine)

When we look at these universalized acknowledgements of the importance of information and communication to individuals, we must be very aware that *as indexers we are intermediaries*. We have the abilities to censor, suppress, and distort information – we can stop someone from being heard (inhibiting their rights to express their thoughts and opinion, and to contribute to cultural activities), we can stop someone from receiving the information he/she needs (inhibiting their rights to education, and to participation in cultural activities). There is hidden power embodied in our functions as intermediaries. Through sheer thoughtlessness we can act against the principles expressed in these two declarations. That is a huge responsibility.

So, while we work with the minutia of information management, especially with back-of-the-book indexes, we are not working in a vacuum. As the title of this article indicates, we need to listen and pay attention in order to make the space in our working lives for ethical thought and decision making.

Business practices

There is a great deal written about business ethics, so there is no need to go into detail here. However, this does not mean that the details are not important. Most business practice issues fall into the following categories, some of

which overlap with the other aspects being discussed in this paper. All these aspects require thought and attention:

- financial issues – estimating, invoicing, tax returns
- author/editor/indexer relationships and communications
- awareness of personal expertise/lack of expertise
- the mechanics of running a business – time commitments, focus on task, etc.
- responsibilities to the client
- responsibilities to self.

What to index?

At the broad level indexers must choose their jobs, and they must find ways of coping with material they do not like. Many indexers have an idea about what type of material they would find personally so difficult to deal with, or so unacceptable, that they would refuse the work – it is a very individual decision that depends on experiences, formal knowledge, values, etc. The importance of this decision in terms of indexing ethics (as differentiated from personal ethics) is not so much that we save ourselves the discomfort, but that we recognize that it is impossible to do justice to material that we cannot bring ourselves to read/think about/look at, and, as such, we would be in clear violation of a business agreement if we accepted the work.

However, the picture is less clear when indexers accept work, but find that on closer reading they disagree with, for example, the author's views, the author's style, and/or the way the research has been done. Will the indexer become annoyed when an author writes sloppily or poorly and shows himself/herself to be a complete twit? One can console oneself that the editor had an even worse job, but it is difficult not to be irritated. What happens to the indexing process then? Does the annoyance spill over? Does the reluctance to read and re-read the material in an effort to understand it mean that the index is compromised?

Hazel Bell describes a dilemma in which she had to index a hotel proprietor's diary. He had castigated various staff members in no uncertain terms. In Bell's opinion, the passages were 'most intemperately written' (Bell, 2000: 19), and her dilemma was how to handle subheadings – to use completely neutral terminology, to 'sanitize' them so that the tone of the original statements was lost, or perhaps even better, to use no subheadings? The question she asked was: 'Should indexers indulge in euphemism any more than in hostile bias...?' (ibid.) This is a thought-provoking question – ideally indexers are neutral, but where does the line fall that demarcates neutrality? The broader issue is that of disagreement with the author's opinions and style.

At the narrow level, indexers must make choices about what to highlight within a text, a photo, a film, etc. There are many challenges at this level, ranging from the subtle to the obvious. At one point in my freelance career I was indexing books for a small packager who produced books in series for a very large American company. A pleasure to work for, they were always appreciative of my work and as respectful as possible of the indexes, given the strictures of producing for another client. Among the books I indexed was a book

on the Second World War. As a rule I would submit my index, they would proof it, sending me a copy only if there were major changes to be made or questions, and that would be that. This time they got back to me very apologetically that the commissioning company was having the book re-indexed but that I would, of course, be paid. I was more than a little curious, and when I received my copy I went through the index trying to figure out the problem.

To begin with, they had given the second indexer two extra pages to use, so there was no need to work at the more general level to which I had been restricted. However, there was another very interesting aspect: the politics. This was right after Tiananmen Square, and the treatment of China in the two indexes was very different. Clearly it was not a space requirement issue (see the entries for Winston Churchill noted below as comparison), yet the space given to entries concerning China was considerably briefer in the new version than in the old. The new index was quite 'story-like', and I will assume it was not indexer oversight, given the decision to change indexers.

In my draft index:

- China had 17 page references spread over five subheadings.
- Churchill had 17 page references spread over one main heading and three subheadings.

In the published index:

- China had four page references spread over two subheadings, one of which was 'map'.
- Churchill had 28 page references spread over one main heading and 23 subheadings (most of the additional locators were to references in the text that I had had to cover with broader headings because of space restrictions, or were what I would have considered passing mentions – the point being that the book was re-indexed in great detail).

So there were two obvious factors affecting what to index in this case – space and political requirements. Possibly the differences were due to differences in American and Canadian viewpoints, but it is food for thought, nonetheless – especially in light of the UN declaration.

Note, however, that the selection process is always a rejection process: one of those 'hidden contradictions' referred to by the ICIE (see above). It is not as simple as saying 'do not censor' because something will always be left out. Space, limitations on descriptors or subject headings, restrictions on abstract length – practically and realistically, these frameworks must exist, so what are the implications? How do we formulate guiding principles in this type of situation? This is a place for considered choices.

Analytical perspectives/world views

Each of us has our own world view. We tend to forget about this and to act as if the people we interact with share our perspectives, even if not our opinions. When we index, however, we need to be conscious that the way we perceive

the world may well be very different from the way a particular author does, and indeed from the way particular users may. The only real solution is to be as conscious as possible of our own assumptions when we meet those in the document.

As an example, I had the pleasure of indexing a fascinating book on glaciers in north-west North America, and the relationships between aboriginal peoples and the glaciers and between European explorers and the glaciers (Cruikshank, 2005). The book treated all with respect. The aboriginal peoples perceive the glaciers as living beings who behave in certain ways and can be irritated and upset by such behaviours as cooking bacon while crossing a glacier or calling the glacier names. The consequences of upsetting a glacier are serious. As I was going along my merry way indexing, I caught myself making an entry about the 'sentience' of glaciers as if it were an interesting idea, rather than as a paradigm/truth integral to the culture and portrayed within the oral histories of the area. I am embarrassed to admit this, but at least I can say I caught myself. What was I doing! I was, of course, looking at the statement from the viewpoint that since glaciers are clearly ice, they are not alive and the attribution of sentience was simply an interesting metaphor to explain why glaciers surge. Definitely not the way the concept was presented in the book, and quite disrespectful.

This is, perhaps, an easy example because the variance between western scientific categorizations and aboriginal holistic knowledge is marked. It is much more difficult to spot our own assumptions when the differences are less acute.

If we accept the importance of information as recognized in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its cultural value, it follows that distortions in the representation of information can have far-reaching consequences. Beghtol notes that all types of assumptions – political, religious, cultural, linguistic, etc. – are entrenched in the design of particular knowledge representation and organization systems (2002: 516), and these systems certainly include indexes, controlled vocabularies, taxonomies and classification systems.

By their very nature, these assumptions are difficult to recognize and to accommodate/counteract. This is where we must make space in our thought processes to increase the probabilities of seeing the obvious and the not so obvious. We need to be open to having our own assumptions challenged and to enter into other world views as necessary. This may be somewhere we want to linger, maybe not, but regardless, in order to be fair to the material, to the author, and to the user, and to do our job with as much clarity as possible, it is critical that we check ourselves as we work to see exactly how much we are stamping the indexing with our own viewpoints or those expressed by the indexing system.

As Bowker and Star point out, 'Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous . . .' (1999: 3).

Vocabularies, maps and naming choices

In our daily lives we are constantly identifying things and ideas, categorizing them, and naming them in ways that makes sense to ourselves. As we index we perform these same functions on a more formal scale, and with more formal responsibilities. We use indexing languages that include natural language, controlled vocabularies, and classification schemes to reflect the concepts we identify. But as we do so, we must be conscious that we have ethical responsibilities, and if we create distortions in the process we are interfering with the rights to expression of opinions and to access to information.

Among the ways in which the translation and mapping processes can go awry are:

- Carelessness – we have less knowledge than we think we have and make incorrect assumptions or poor representation choices.
- Choice of terms/formulations of terms without thought to the possible connotations.
- Intrusion of cultural bias.
- Intrusion of personal bias.
- The mapping within the index as a whole (heading–subheading relationships; cross-reference structures) may represent structures/beliefs that are not congruent with the concepts being represented and/or with user sensibilities.
- The hierarchies within a controlled vocabulary or classification scheme may similarly have biases.
- Political correctness may be used without thought, or not used at all.

Problems occur at three levels: the index/indexing system, the structure of the indexing language, and the actual terms chosen. Sheila Intner points out that indexers must be wary of choices that, in effect, suppress or shield information from discovery. Among the ways she notes that this type of censorship can occur are poorly designed indexing systems with overlapping terminology in which users have difficulty finding all the materials on a subject, and inadequate cross-reference systems (1984: 105). Underdeveloped and poorly developed maps can be worse than no map at all.

The difficulties with controlled vocabularies are well documented. Sanford Berman spearheaded the battle with LCSH over biased terminology and vocabulary structures. Many changes have been made, but problems still remain. Similarly, classification systems such as Dewey Decimal Classification have inherent biases that are difficult to manage and compensate for (see Olson, 2000 for discussions of this). It is, of course, more difficult with such monolithic organizations and systems, but the same problems arise with all indexing languages. Language is not static, and meanings shift and adapt across space and time. And as noted above, world views are entrenched in indexing languages.

The following, from the University of Winnipeg Library's tutorial on Information Literacy, provides a succinct illustration of term bias:

A comparison between selected indexing terms illustrates

how language in indexing can be used to set the terms of debate:

Alternative Press Index

1. Media bias
2. Discrimination against gays-lesbians
3. Environmental degradation and destruction
4. Terrorism, state
5. Reproductive rights

Library of Congress Subject Headings

- Press & propaganda
Sex discrimination;
discrimination;
heterosexism;
homophobia
Environmental
degradation
State-sponsored terrorism
Birth control

(Hunt, 2004)

The differences in perspective are very clear – the connotations are very different. The filtering process of the controlled vocabulary immediately changes the way the information is perceived by the user.

The subtleties of language are our domain. Particularly in back of the book indexes, we act as authors. As authors we set the tone of the index through its grammar and the terms chosen. Ideally we aim for neutrality that allows the voice of the original information to be apparent. This neutrality is relatively easy with some kinds of materials, such as how-to-do-it home repair. Other types of materials, however, are more challenging:

- Histories and biographies evoke personal baggage.
- Multiple-authored works leave us struggling to find commonalities of language and connotation.
- Materials that excite us or depress us change our working spirit.
- Database indexing introduces the need for consistency and controlled vocabularies with their inherent issues.
- We struggle over recall and precision issues.
- Non-print materials bring with them multiple layers of subjective analysis and translation issues.

Responsibilities to the subject(s)

What do we owe the information, the people, the events, the theories, etc. that appear within the articles, pictures, books, films, etc. that we index?

Sometimes editors or authors request that the indexer proceed in a particular way, saying 'This or that is not really the point of the book, so you don't have to go into detail about it.' Is this acceptable? Do we have an obligation to the material that counterbalances employer/client viewpoints (viewpoints sometimes based on perceived rather than actual needs)? If the indexer recognizes that a particular approach restricts the users to certain categories of information and thus is not in the best interests of either the users or the material itself (since some of the information is being suppressed), what is the solution?

For example, an author indicates that she wants all her academic colleagues mentioned in the index (even when their work is not really discussed), but that it does not really matter

about the women interviewed since they were just the interviewees. This is very disturbing – a silencing of voices that would not be heard elsewhere, while at the same time a promotion of individuals the researcher values, but has said nothing about. Clearly her point of departure is not user needs, nor respect for the substance of her research, but rather her discipline and the process of her research. My reaction is to make space for the interviewees. Similarly when historical research is involved I try to ensure that the people who are the subjects, or perhaps the authors, of the primary sources, appear in the index, even if they are the butcher, the slave, etc.

But what does being fair to the subject entail? How do we balance it with being fair to the client? Can we identify the conflicting needs of client/employer, subject and user and try to ensure that there is a balance in our approach that respects all. Referring again to Hazel Bell's hotel workers: 'Should we give characters, who have been well kicked in the text, a further boot in the index?' (2000: 19). Being fair to all parties requires thoughtfulness.

User needs: last, but first

We index to provide quick, easy and accurate access to information. The whole point is to facilitate the connection between the user and the information. Sometimes we lose sight of the goal.

- If an editor says 'Skip the appendices,' is this all right?
- If the powers-that-be decide that they no longer want to fund thesaurus maintenance, so instruct us to not add any more words, what happens to lost information?
- If the author wants you to retell the story in the index, making it difficult to read, what do you say?
- When client needs and user needs conflict, what is your role?
- If following the rules/standards is not the best choice for the user, how can a balance be met?
- If an index must fit in limited space, will cutting the rejected terms exclude user /categories of users?

I would like to think of myself as an advocate for the user, using my knowledge of search processes and information storage to facilitate the easiest retrieval possible. However, knowing what to do once I have taken that stand is not always easy. The competing demands of client/employer requirements, time, space and money restrictions, vocabulary limitations, system dependency and personal (lack of) knowledge mean that maintaining the stand is a balancing act.

The bottom line is that suppression or distortion of information, poor index design, and careless indexing all hurt the user and defeat the purpose of our work. We have to think about the users' needs all the time, and struggle to maintain a balance that is weighted in their favour. Otherwise – why bother?

Conclusion

As in many situations that require ethical reflection, the goal is to apply the principles of conduct in as appropriate and as

fair a manner as possible, to determine the best possible path among choices. The solutions often cannot be the best or the most right from all perspectives. It is essential to 'stop and listen' – to be aware of the places in our indexing lives that are sites for ethical conflict, and to make the spaces in our thoughts and processes to allow for the critical analysis necessary for ethical choices. As indexers we can give voice to information and we can silence it. We have to be very aware of what we are doing so that we can make decisions that are as harmonious with ethical principles as possible.

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Further reading

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Indexing the suburbs – the lighter side

While reading up on the history and culture of suburbia, I was reminiscing with some fondness about the many TV comedies I watched as a youngster – almost all of which were set in the comfortable world of the suburbs. From *Leave it to Beaver* to *My three sons*, television comedy seemed to mirror the familiar world of the single-family detached home with garage, nicely paved driveway, and ample lawn.

One of my favourite sitcoms was *Please don't eat the daisies*, the TV version of Jean Kerr's best-selling collection of short stories about suburban life. On borrowing a library copy and starting to leaf through it, I was surprised to find that there was, in fact, an index. There was also an introduction, which Kerr felt obliged to provide for her book 'because it doesn't have an Index and it ought to have something'. In the end, however, she also provided a hilarious index which is worth reading on its own. Kerr mimics indexing conventions expertly, and adds a few zingers of her own.

Here are just some of the entries:

Alaska, baked, 119

Bloomingdale's, New Rochelle, 29
Bloomingdale's, New York, 24

chicken pie, Birdseye, frozen, 11
Cola, Coca, 224

diet, Mother's Milk, 49
dishwasher, Hotpoint, 30

good riddance (to bad rubbish), 17

How Not to Write a Play, Simon and Schuster, \$3.50

Jill, Jack and, Nursery School, 40

kill, urge to, 66

Maltose, Dextrin-, 111
Morningstar, *Marjorie*, 56

numbers, tell me not in mournful, 179

place, no, like home, 80

sheets, Pepperell, 45
spaghetti, Heinz's, 12

Tarzan, see Jane
tooth, eye for eye and tooth for, 113

vermouth, dry, 89
vermouth, sweet, 112

The cross-reference from 'Tarzan' to 'Jane,' naturally, has no corresponding entry for 'Jane'. As well, a rather interesting entry with many undifferentiated locators – 'beer, Rheingold the dry, 17, 38, 74–5, 164, 195, 211' – is not mentioned in any of the short stories. And, for the kicker, this note at the end of the index:

In all cases, the page numbers refer to the magazines in which these pieces originally appeared

Well, what if they do? An index whose subjects range from T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway to Betty Crocker and Frosty the Snowman has achieved a measure of distinction, indeed.

Cheryl Lemmens

Reference: Jean Kerr, *Please don't eat the daisies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).