

Professionalism and the indexer

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This article explores what 'professionalism' means for the indexer, the benefits of 'legitimized authority', the part to be played by education, training and recognized standards, and the role of indexing societies at a national and international level.

Professionalism is a term which is frequently used casually, with little attention to the implications of the term and its inherent meaning. When indexers refer to themselves as professionals, how much thought is put into considering the process by which they have achieved that status? Professionalism is a process, which requires the people involved to attain and maintain their professional status.

Wikipedia gives the following definition of a professional:

A **professional** is required to possess a large knowledge derived from extensive academic and practical training. Professional skills are important to the well-being of society. Professions are self-regulating, in that they control the training and evaluation processes that admit new persons to the field. Professionals have autonomy in the workplace; they are expected to utilize their independent judgment in carrying out their professional responsibilities. Finally, professions are regulated by ethical standards.

Comparing this definition with others in dictionaries and various Internet resources, there are common elements which recur. In particular, these are training and education, autonomy, regulation and ethics. Christine Jacobs writes elsewhere in this issue of *The Indexer* on ethics in indexing, so I shall concentrate on the other aspects.

Downie (1990) gives an account of the requirements of a professional. His discussion is in relation to educators, but there is much which resonates with the work of professional indexers.

1. The professional has skills or expertise proceeding from a broad knowledge base.
2. The professional provides a service based on a special relationship with those whom he or she serves. This relationship involves a special attitude of beneficence tempered with integrity. This includes fairness, honesty and a bond based on legal and ethical rights and duties, authorized by the professional institution and legalized by public esteem.
3. To the extent that the public recognizes the authority of the professional, he or she has the social function of speaking out on broad matters of public policy and justice, going beyond duties to specific clients.
4. In order to discharge these functions, professionals must be independent of the influence of the State or commerce.
5. The professional should be educated rather than trained.

This means having a wide cognitive perspective, seeing the place of his or her skills within that perspective, and continuing to develop this knowledge and skills within a framework of values.

6. A professional should have legitimized authority. If a profession is to have credibility in the eyes of the general public, it must be widely recognized as independent, disciplined by its professional association, actively expanding its knowledge base and concerned with the education of its members. If it is widely recognized as satisfying these conditions, then it will possess moral as well as legal legitimacy, and its pronouncements will be listened to with respect.

Education and training

Taking Downie's first point, the indexer needs a broad knowledge base. This implies more than education and training, which he comes to in point 5. It implies that the professional needs a wide world view and an ability to look beyond immediate issues. In talking of education rather than training, the expectation of the professional is to have a wide perspective.

Training implies a finite course or time period, which comes to an end with a qualification or certification. Training as such is only a part of education, which continues throughout the life of a professional. Education requires a framework, which can be established by a training curriculum, and allows professionals to continue to grow in knowledge and expertise during their working life. High standards of intellectual knowledge can only be gained if the required education and training is successfully completed. To achieve this, professional individuals and their professional bodies must be prepared to invest in training and qualifications. This takes both time and money, but it is an ethical responsibility of a professional person to make this investment.

Indexers and their professional societies need to look carefully at the current training provision, and at issues of qualifications and certification. A major issue is making qualifications to be of comparable standards in different countries. It would be impractical, and probably not desirable, to even consider international qualifications, but active discussion and moderation between the indexing societies would help to make the public face of indexing qualifications transparent, as seen by our clients, principally the publishers.

The educated professional is able to command legitimized authority, which has credibility in the eyes of the public. Public recognition of the authority of the practitioner is gained by virtue of working to ethical standards and by being accountable. Accountability has various facets – professionals are accountable to their profession and its body of knowledge, to their clients, to their professional society and to their fellow professionals. As indexers, the client includes not only the person who commissions the work, whether it is a publisher, an author or some other body, but also the wider public who will use the information tool in their work or leisure. Professionalism demands a high standard of integrity and ethical actions.

The professional institution authorizes the legal and ethical rights and duties of the professional member. The onus is on the professional association to provide the discipline required and to enable its members to continue to expand their knowledge and education. The development of powerful professional associations is hugely important, particularly in the world of indexing, where a high proportion of practitioners work freelance. Currently, the countries of the world with the highest concentrations of indexers have professional societies. The publishing industry treats the professional societies with courtesy, but it is very evident that the societies are too small to have a powerful voice. Moves over the past few years to develop common themes with all of the societies have developed a confidence and strength in them, but much more needs to be done, and done rapidly, to develop a worldwide network of societies which can speak to the publishing industry with a clear and authoritative voice.

Autonomy

Downie does not mention autonomy directly, but implies it in discussing legitimized authority. In order to possess autonomy in working as an indexer, the practitioner is required to have a full knowledge of the practical skills of indexing, and the rules and philosophy which underpin them. People can teach themselves skills, or learn skills from others in an apprenticeship relationship, and become competent technicians. To progress from this level to be able to practise autonomously as an indexer, a deeper knowledge and understanding of language, the rules of language and of the subject material is required. Autonomy requires defined boundaries, which are given to indexers by the International Standards. ISO 999 *Information and documentation – guidelines for the content, organization and presentation of indexes* is the most widely accepted standard for indexing, which gives a framework of rules and guidance which can be interpreted as required for specific projects. Perhaps one of the major differences between a technician and a professional is that the technician knows and follows set rules, and the professional has the depth of knowledge to assert his or her autonomy in interpreting rules for specific applications.

Regulation

Where professions have legal regulation, as in the case of the medical or legal professions, the professional require-

ments of the practitioner are set high, and continuing proof of ability to practise is required. Indexing is not regulated as such, which allows anyone to claim that they are a competent indexer. Membership of a professional organization is not required. Booth (2001) points out that 'good indexing should be recognizable when evaluated by agreed criteria'. It requires a competent professional society to produce agreed criteria, and as globalization is a reality in publishing, the criteria need to be agreed worldwide to have value. Lack of regulation in indexing puts the onus on professional societies to convince publishers that using professional indexers is vital to ensure that published indexes are of a high standard, and to prevent those whom Booth (2001) describes as ill-equipped and incompetent from tarnishing the reputation of indexers in general.

Conclusion

Professionalism is a concept that all indexers should strive for, both individually and through the indexing societies. It involves personal investment, support of the national societies and cooperation internationally between the societies. Education, training and qualifications are key factors in the process of professionalism.

A successful profession will possess moral as well as legal legitimacy, and will be listened to with respect. When the indexing profession is powerful enough to set industry-wide standards and training curricula leading to widely recognized qualifications, it will have gained its full moral and legal legitimacy.

References

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