

automatically reject a book with six locators per entry' (Bella Hass Weinberg, *The Indexer* 16 (4), 279).

Long, sustained continuity is one major difficulty of indexing narrative texts, resulting particularly in huge entries for main characters in biographies whose breakdown is a whole art in itself, not considered in the Wheatley criteria.

I do not question the panel's industry and conscientiousness, but suggest that these are the reasons why, in 31 years of the medal's history, with 27 medals awarded and 26 works commended (11 Highly; 15 Commended), totalling 53 works noticed, only five (9.4%) are sustained narratives concerning human lives (three medals—Canning biography, 1962; Churchill biography, 1967; Pepys diary, 1983; and two Commendeds—*Crisis and compromise: politics in the fourth Republic*, 1964; Dickens biography, 1990). The other 48 works noticed are all drily disciplinary academic specialisms, technical texts, or documentary collections, with prescribed terms and subheadings.

No soft text has won an award from the Wilson Panel.

HAZEL BELL

Dry texts not cut and dried

In her address to the 25th annual American Society of Indexers Conference, Hazel K. Bell pled most eloquently for the art of 'soft indexing', the compendium of skills, intelligence and judgment needed to produce a back-of-the-book index for non-specialist, human-focused texts. In the process, however, she suggested of drier, technical, specialist material that 'the sole aim is clarity; it is purely information-bearing text'. In fact, specialist texts may also be written by 'imaginative writers with particular vision', and the topics they deal with are far more nuanced than the non-specialist may imagine. I am currently running a department for the indexing of legal texts, and despite the highly technical nature of many of our publications, our indexing skills cannot be replaced by a thesaurus or standardized scheme. Even the most technical indexing has an art all its own.

In the legal materials I work with, three major obstacles stand in the way of both automation and standardization of the indexing process: the difficulties of textual interpretation; the variability of terminology; and different levels of readership.

Legal texts make extensive use of examples, usually from administrative and judicial case decisions, to clarify theoretical points of law and to illustrate precedence for particular arguments. The actual substance of the text, its gut, may not have anything at all to do with the specific point of the case used as an illustration. I may want to index a case annotation

about an avocado tree plantation, for instance, or a chinchilla farm, under child labor laws or migrant workers—the avocados and chinchillas are beside the point. One of my favorite index entries, which I found in an old tax manual—'Dogs, garage walls falling on'—was in fact totally mis-indexed; the gut of the text was about tax deductions for damages to personal residences.

Gauging the meaning of the text may not be a simple matter, however. Lawyers have subtle minds and the law is a complex thing; the detailed relationship between case and subject is not always obvious and it may be hard to find a way to conceptualize the idea at issue—which brings me to my second problem, variability of terminology. Many people, from non-specialist indexers to specialist text users, tend to assume that technical terminology is precise and unchanging, and that indexing it is correspondingly a simple matter. In fact technical terms layer on additional levels of meaning to the ordinary language of the text. Terms like actions and procedures have precise legal meaning but they will also be used in the text as ordinary English words. Some concepts have two or more terminological representatives; current fashion or usage may favor first one, then the other. Some terms are related but not quite exactly the same—a multi-employer pension plan and a multiple employer pension plan are defined as two separate terms in the US Internal Revenue Code, but nowadays they are generally referred to together as multi-employer plans, and many lawyers are unaware of or have forgotten the differences between them. In large multi-volume texts using several authors, differences in background, expertise, and simple human idiosyncrasy may result in a cacophony of related terms which have to be harmonized by the indexer. The terminology of 'dry' text is anything but cut and dried.

Of all the complex issues facing the specialist indexer, perhaps the most difficult is the problem of readership. While a publication may be theoretically aimed at readers with a particular level of expertise, or at those involved in a particular specialty, the actual readers may vary widely. Lawyer users may be specialists or generalists, corporate workers, legal clerks, students, new to the law or well-established practitioners; non-lawyers may be business people, accountants, personnel administrators or secretaries. The index has to work for as many of these people as possible.

Until editors and readers are automated, even the most technical of manuals will be written and read by human beings, with all their faults and foibles and fuzzy thinking, and it will take another human being to help them find what they want in the text.

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