The future of indexing

Cheryl Landes

The author considers some ways in which indexers can orient themselves to the future.

We have seen many changes in the publishing industry during the past ten years. Technological advances in book production and decreased readership led to many publishers closing or being consolidated into larger concerns. This industrial disruption has affected every professional indexer, some more than others. Many indexers added services to supplement declining income, while others left the field or retired. Yet others remain busy, working as many hours as they want in the craft.

Change is still under way as technology evolves and improves. Although this can be frightening, new opportunities are emerging. At the same time, some things might not change.

So what can we expect? Based on my experiences as an indexer and technical communications consultant who works with new technologies, I am seeing a mix of traditional indexing thriving, along with some different indexing methods to accommodate modern book production. Here are my observations in more detail.

Observation 1: Print books are here to stay

Statistics are mixed about the state of print book versus ebook demand, but a trend toward increased print book readership is emerging. According to a study Pew Research Center conducted from 17 March to 12 April 2015, 63 per cent of adults in the United States said they read at least one print book during the past year, compared with 69 per cent in 2014 and 71 per cent in 2011. Seventy-two per cent of adults read a book in any format during the past year, which remained steady since 2011, when readership was at 79 per cent (Rainie and Perrin, 2015).

However, another study by the Association of American Publishers during the first five months of 2015 indicates that ebook readership is leveling off and declining (Alter, 2015). Other signs of declining digital book reading are apparent, with Amazon opening more brick-and-mortar stores and rising sales at independent bookstores.

Why the shift? Readers of all ages who prefer print over digital often say they love the feel of the books in their hands, and they like to turn the pages. More readers are becoming frustrated over the user-unfriendliness of their eReaders and have abandoned the eReaders for tablets and print. The cost of ebooks is now often the same as print books, so readers are not finding as many incentives to read digital books rather than hard copies. It seems that when there is a choice and cost is a factor, readers will choose the printed books. Perhaps another reason, based on my experi-ences, is that some readers do not want to stare at a different electronic screen when they are reading books for pleasure, because they are working on their computers all day. Print

books are also more portable; they do not require batteries or power cords.

Another advantage of print books, which I had not thought about until recently, came from one of my friends who is not an indexer but loves to read. She said, 'I am reading the most annoying Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, and I just want to throw it across the room! But it's on my iPad.' We are not recommending tossing books anywhere, but I can understand her frustration.

Observation 2: Indexing processes are changing – sort of

As indexers, our thought processes for analyzing text and creating entries will never change. Indexing is a human act, and only humans can accurately read text and determine the various ways that readers will find it. However, the production processes are changing, and that affects how we write entries. Sometimes these are related to limitations in the software publishers use to produce books; other times, it's because of restrictions related to single-sourcing – where different book formats are published from the same source material. For a more detailed explanation of single-sourcing, see my article 'Does embedded indexing have a future?' in the June 2016 issue of *The Indexer.*

The technologies and processes publishers use to produce books are still changing, and this is where I am noticing a trend for the indexing profession. When ebooks took off in popularity, more publishers started asking indexers to tag (embed) entries into the manuscripts so that they could generate indexes for different formats (primarily print and EPUB) from the same electronic files. Handing off the source files to indexers to tag meant that the publishers could not work on the files until the indexers finished inserting the tags. This can slow the production process.

Now my former embedded indexing clients are not using these processes at all. Instead, they are taking advantage of the power of XML and scripting to insert unique paragraph numbers throughout the manuscript, and I index in my standalone indexing program of choice (in my case, Macrex) by paragraph number. I analyze the content as I always have and write my entries in Macrex, but now my reference locators are paragraph numbers. When I return my completed index to the publisher, the publisher runs a script that embeds the index entries into the source content and translates the paragraph numbers into page numbers for the print version of the book. The publisher can also create a linked version of the index for an ebook, PDF, or other electronic formats. I provide an example of a process one of my clients uses in my article (Landes, 2016). These

methods allow publishers to continue production work on the content while the indexer completes the index, so there are no work stoppages.

Although all of my indexing clients now have these processes, I am aware of indexers who still index the traditional way, creating indexes from printouts or PDFs with their dedicated indexing software (Macrex, Cindex, or Sky). Most likely this will continue, but I believe it will be on a smaller scale. More publishers want to create content in multiple formats, and moving to different, more efficient processes that reduce production costs allows that flexibility. Despite print readership increasing, I expect publishers will continue modifying production processes as technology continues to improve to become more efficient and lower costs even further. Keeping updated with technology also helps them respond faster to market changes.

Observation 3: Indexing is expanding beyond simply creating indexes

Indexing is indexing, except when it is not. In other words, there are other ways to find information, especially in the electronic world. I use the term 'findability' to describe all of the possible methods to look for content in print and electronically.

Examples include search and navigation, and indexing is a form of navigation. To navigate a print book, we browse the table of contents, chapter and section headings, page numbers, and an index. To navigate online, we use buttons, tabs, tables of contents, menus, links, and indexes. Sometimes all of these navigation options are available online; other times, only some are.

While search often does not return the results readers want, even if they are proficient with advanced search features, it is here to stay. Search is the most common method we use to find information online. According to Search Engine Land, Google handles more than 3 billion searches a day, which exceeds more than 1 trillion a year (Sullivan, 2015). Google holds the largest market share of the search engines at 75 per cent (Sterling, 2015), so the total number of searches is much higher.

So the point of this discussion is that indexers can provide additional services. By expanding our knowledge of how search works, what makes software interfaces usable, and understanding the different methods people use to find information, we can help make information more findable. Some examples of how we can expand our services include writing content optimized for search, reorganizing content so that it flows logically for users (more of a developmental editing or consulting role, depending on the client's request), and evaluating software interfaces for effective usability and findability. Although print readership is increasing, reading content online will not disappear. Indexers who also have excellent writing and editing skills can expand their businesses into new revenue streams.

Taxonomy work continues to grow as well because of the increasing volumes of electronic content. Recently I saw a new variety of work in this area called a metadata taxonomy, which was mentioned in the June 2016 edition of the *Simply*

XML newsletter (free email subscription). In other words, some large organizations are now creating taxonomies for their metadata.

Observation 4: Indexers are also becoming consultants

For the past five years, I have noticed more small publishers and self-publishers contacting me with questions about setting up workflows for indexing. Often they have a lot of questions, and providing guidance can take several hours. As indexers, we often educate our clients about the indexing process at no extra charge, but usually we do not spend a few hours with those efforts. We could offer consulting as a service. Many consultants I know outside indexing will offer a free half-hour consultation, and then any hours above that are charged the consultant's regular hourly fee.

Observation 5: The future of indexing is filled with new opportunities

While the future is uncertain, it is exciting. Instead of worrying whether our craft is dying, we can pursue new opportunities now and prepare for additional changes in the future. Indexers love to learn, and so why not expand our learning beyond reading the books we index and fine-tuning our indexing skills? Learning new skills that we can incorporate into our craft, use to expand our services, and help us continue to grow personally and professionally is an investment in ourselves. The benefits are priceless.

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Organizations and websites

The Content Marketing Institute has many articles, webinars, and other information about SEO, metadata, and taxonomies. The articles are targeted toward marketers, but the information is helpful for anyone working with helping users find content: http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/

ConveyUX (annual usability conference in Seattle): http://conveyux.com/

Google. Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide, http://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en//webmasters/docs/search-engine-optimization-starter-guide.pdf

Harry Stewart Conferences and Events hosts a variety of events about digital asset management: www.henrystewart-conferences.com/#/dam

LavaCon hosts conferences in the United States and Europe focusing on content strategy and usability: http://lavacon.org/

Moz. The Beginner's Guide to SEO, https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo

Search Engine Land: http://searchengineland.com/

SEO for Beginners: http://seoforbeginners.com/

Taxonomy Bootcamp: www.taxonomybootcamp.com/2016/

Usability Body of Knowledge: www.usabilitybok.org/

User Experience Professionals Association: https://uxpa.org/

User Interface Engineering (UIE): www.uie.com/

WritersUA: www.welinske.com/

Cheryl Landes founded Tabby Cat Communications in Seattle in 1995. She has indexed since 1991, when she began her career as a technical writer at a marine transportation company in Seattle. Today, she is a technical and marketing communications consultant and specializes as a findability strategist. She has published five books and contributed chapters about findability to The Language of Content Strategy *(XML Press, 2014) and* The Language of Technical Communication *(XML Press, 2016). Her latest book about findability will be published by XML Press in 2017. Cheryl currently lives in Vancouver, Washington. Email:* clandes407@aol.com

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