

From the 17th century: a German instruction in indexing

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In one of the compendia of mathematical and scientific problems for the 'educated layman' which were quite popular in the late 17th and early 18th century, the *Delitiae philosophicae et mathematicae/Philosophische und mathematische Erquickstunden . . . bestehend in fünffhundert nützlichen und lustigen Kunstfragen . . .** by Georg Philip Harssdörffer (Nürnberg: Wolfgang Moritz Endter, 1692), one of the 'questions' deals with the purpose of book indexes and with the mechanics of indexing. The first part of the chapter, in English translation, reads as follows:

The 13th question. How to make indexes in books without great effort.

An index according to the ABC is a very necessary teacher for a book, in that it points out with a finger, as it were, where to find one or the other thing, and nobody has the time to read all books, especially if they are not school books and serve only for reference. There should be three kinds of indexes. 1. The index of order, in which the titles of all chapters are listed in their order. 2. The subject index, arranged according to the ABC, and for this it is very useful to have a box with 24 compartments, each of which is marked with a letter. If you now wish to make an index you must write the contents in proper measure on a sheet of paper, cut it up into individual pieces and then you must put each piece in its own letter compartment. Finally, you take them out again, arrange one letter after the other, and either paste up the paper slips in their proper order or write them out once again. 3. There should also be an index of authors, which is useful for many people, in that one may ask for an unknown book that he may need, and there should also be a listing of the format, the year when, and the place where it was printed. Some think that this is superfluous and an idle ambition, but one should not deem this to be the intention; rather, it is to act honestly, and not to pretend that one owns something that belongs to someone else.

The 'index of order' is of course not an index in the

modern sense of the term but a table of contents, at that time often listing not only the headings of chapters but also an analytical description of their contents (a custom still prevailing in France and some other countries). The division of the alphabet into 24 letters shows that the letters *j* and *w* (added in the Middle Ages but used as separate letters by printers only about 50 years before the publication of the book) had not yet attained the status of separately counted letters, and were often interfiled in alphabetical listings with *i* and *v*. † As to the author index, it is not quite clear how it could aid anyone in finding an 'unknown book', unless it were a book written by a certain author but not previously known by title to a reader. The author's insistence on detailed physical description, though evidently not generally appreciated at that time, shows that he was genuinely concerned about bibliographical accuracy.

At that point, however, he seems to have run out of factual advice on the making of indexes, and the major part of the chapter (about one and a half pages out of a total of somewhat more than two pages) is not at all about indexes, but recounts two fables; one about the relative merits of large and small books, the other about the business of printing which produces both good and bad books without making any distinction between them. Only the last paragraph returns to what perhaps might be an early discussion of citation indexing. It tells the story of an author who, when asked why he had listed the names of all of his sources in the index to his book, answered that he did so in order to authenticate the truth; to which his friend replied that in order to seek the truth it would be better to state only the facts but not to list the authors relating them, as did Aristotle in his works. The learned author, an assessor at the court of Nuremberg, adds his disapproving commentary: 'Such a bad practice is quite contrary to natural fairness'.

I am indebted to my friend Herbert A. Kellner in Darmstadt who brought this elusive piece of information on index making to my attention.

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†*I* and *J* were sometimes still interfiled in German indexes well into the 1950s.