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Glenda Browne has been a freelance indexer of books, journals and websites in a wide variety of subject areas since 1988. She is also a medical librarian one day per week. She is co-author of Website indexing and The indexing companion, and author of The indexing companion workbook: book indexing. Glenda was awarded Highly Recommended in the ANZSI Medal for her index to The indexing companion.

Glenda teaches indexing at Macleay College and for ANZSI and other professional groups, and has been the ANZSI representative on the IDPF EPUB Indexes Working Group. She is ANZSI Education Officer, and the inaugural convenor of the NSW Indexers and Education Groups. More information at www.webindexing.biz

# Ethics for the indexer

## Heather Ebbs

*Indexers face ethical dilemmas surprisingly often, as evidenced by conference sessions on ethics and the frequent online discussions about politically correct language, a client's ethics, subcontracting, censorship … the list goes on. Ethical guidance does exist, but we also need to keep talking about these issues to increase our individual readiness to respond appropriately and to enhance our overall professionalism as a body.*

Most of us have a vague idea of what is meant by *ethics* or *ethical practices*. 'It's doing the right thing,' we might say. The problem is, of course, that there is often not One Right Thing. The rightness of an action is coloured by the circumstances, the magnitude of the issue and the individuals or groups involved.

For an example of the complexity of 'doing the right thing', we can look at something outside indexing that might seem clearly to be 'doing the wrong thing' – killing a fellow human. Clearly, it is wrong to kill. But what if we kill in self-defence, to protect our own life? Many would say that, yes, killing in self-defence is OK. But the continuum doesn't end there. Is killing to protect another person's life OK? Does it make a difference if the other person is an innocent child or an adult criminal? What about killing to protect our personal property? What about killing to protect our nation? What about killing to protect our ideals? Is it OK to kill to end another person's suffering? Is it OK to kill one person to protect ten?

You see the dilemma. Even with something as seemingly basic as not killing another human, there is no one right answer for every circumstance, and indeed we very quickly get into territory where morally good people will disagree.

Ethics are what enable us to choose the right action for the circumstances. Ethics are based on our core values, and a code of ethics is a systematic way of documenting the principles of action based on our core values.

## Ethics and professionalism

A code of ethics is one of the six hallmarks of a 'true' profession. (The others are intellectual operation requiring depth of knowledge and considerable individual responsibility, evidence-based knowledge, practical objectives that have been developed from the aforementioned knowledge, self-organization and self-regulation, and the capacity for communicating profession-related research and practices.)

A code of ethics outlines how the members of a profession are expected to conduct themselves in their everyday professional life based on the core values of that profession. It does not and cannot try to identify how a member of the profession should respond in every single situation; rather, it presents a set of guiding principles to help the individual and the professional group identify the best option for the circumstances.

A great many organizations and professions have codes of ethics, and in the so-called true professions, breaches of these codes can lead to loss of membership and a prohibition against practising. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers and others could face such punishment for a breach of ethics. Among the 'soft' professions, codes of ethics still exist, but the ability of the profession to discipline those who violate the code may be weak. An individual could presumably have their membership revoked, but when membership is not tied through regulation to the right to practise, then revoked membership is of little practical weight.

For example, the Society of Technical Communicators (STC) has a set of ethical principles covering legality, honesty, confidentiality, quality, fairness and professionalism. There is no mention of what happens if a member does not observe those principles. Similarly, the American Medical Writers Association has a code of ethics that leans heavily on how members *should* conduct themselves, but there is no penalty suggested for breaches of conduct. The International Association of Business Communicators has a code of ethics based on principles of honesty, accuracy and fairness, and violators can have their membership terminated. How much that affects the individual is questionable. A great many other such organizations have similar codes or sets of principles.

So where does that leave indexers and indexing?

## Ethics in indexing

Like other soft professions, indexing as a whole has no practical way of enforcing a code of ethics. But even though there may be little *professional* weight to an indexing code of ethics, there can be a great deal of *moral* weight in them. Codes of ethics offer our clients some degree of assurance that our profession takes ethical responsibilities seriously. Codes of ethics also offer indexing societies and practitioners guidelines or principles to turn to when we encounter situations that ethically trouble us.

And we are troubled. A look at the index to *The Indexer* shows not just a few articles on ethics in indexing (see the list of resources), but also letters to the editor raising various issues, including an admonition against *The Indexer* itself for reporting what was seen as an unfairly negative comment about an index in a book review.

Repeatedly, indexers raise issues in Internet discussion lists and social media about politically correct language, a client's ethics, subcontracting, taking on work in which you have little subject knowledge, how to index biased or inaccurate information and so on.

Ethics in indexing has also been a session topic at indexing society conferences over the past several years – ISC/SCI in 2010 and 2015, ASI in 2012, ANZSI in 2001, 2013 and 2015, and briefly during the annual meeting, SI in 2015. Most of these sessions have been in a scenario-and-discussion format, and it is remarkable how we indexers can have very different responses to any given ethical dilemma.

Indexers clearly feel a need for help in resolving ethical issues. Is there any help out there? The short answer is yes.

Here's a slightly longer answer. ISC/SCI does not have a code of ethics, nor do ANZSI or ASAIB. However, SI has a 'Code of professional conduct', published in November 2007. ASI also has a code of ethics, ratified in 1997, but it does not appear to be available on its website. Much earlier, in 1975, ASI ratified a 'Statement on ethical responsibility of indexers and index publishers to index users'. The statement was developed by ASI's Committee on Ethics, Standards and Specifications. Most recently, ASI published its *Best Practices for Indexing* in 2015.
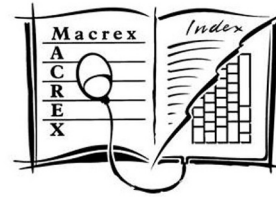
## A closer look at existing codes

There are four primary areas of ethical responsibility for an indexer: to the profession and colleagues, to clients (publisher, editor, author), to readers and to themselves. The SI 'Code of professional conduct' covers all four of these areas, but at a high level. ASI's guidelines tend to focus on the ethical primacy of responsibility to the reader, at a quite specific level. Together, they offer thorough ethical guidance to indexers.

### SI: 'Code of professional conduct'

The purpose of SI's 'Code of professional conduct' is to 'set out the standards of professional behaviour expected of indexers who are members of the Society of Indexers'. Society members are required to acknowledge acceptance of the code annually (an important requirement, as it means

that all SI members are aware of and have read their code). Alleged breaches are investigated by a disciplinary panel; if breaches are proven, sanctions can be imposed, varying from exclusion from membership, exclusion from the Society's directory and suspension of membership, to reprimand, retraining or any other sanction that may be deemed appropriate.

The code has four subsections – public interest, duties to the profession, professional competence and integrity, and duties to the society – all of which are directed toward individual members (in the form 'Members shall …').

Under 'public interest', the code refers to human rights, non-discrimination and compliance with the law. 'Duties to the profession' include upholding standards, developing professional knowledge individually and broadly, acting with integrity towards fellow indexers and clients, supporting other members in their professional development and advancing public understanding of indexing. Under 'professional competence and integrity', the code covers good practices, professional competency, use of the society's logo, taking responsibility for work, avoiding conflict, skill development and maintenance, and confidentiality. 'Duties to the society' include promoting SI's objectives, conducting yourself reputably and not ascribing personal views or actions to the society.

Overall, this code offers excellent high-level guidance to indexers in all four areas of ethical responsibility. The code's 'duties to the profession' and 'to the society' clearly apply to the areas of ethical responsibility to the profession and colleagues. Duties to clients and readers are covered under 'public interest' and 'professional competence and integrity'. Duties to themselves are touched on under compliance with the law, skill and knowledge development and perhaps a couple of others.

### ASI: 'Statement on ethical responsibility of indexers and index publishers to index users'

As its title implies, the ASI 'Statement on ethical responsibility' deals almost exclusively with our responsibility to the reader.

The ASI statement begins, 'An index is intended to provide accurate and complete guidance to the type of material specified in the title of the index. Hence, indexers and index publishers have an obligation to provide, within specified limitations, such an index.' The statement emphasizes the need for an indexer's professional competency, the publisher's indexing planning 'so that the user can avoid loss of information and loss of time and money', and the index's comprehensiveness and quality. Then it gets into further specifications about titling, electronic devices used, turnaround time, output and so on.

It is a very formally written statement that includes expectations of publishers, and it does not cover indexers' responsibilities toward the profession, colleagues, clients or themselves. Nonetheless, it does contain gems of ethical guidance. In their 1978 text *Indexing concepts and methods,* Harold Borko and Charles Bernier (the latter was ASI's first official president) echo these gems in the book's section on ethical considerations. Interestingly, Borko and Bernier also

offer ethical considerations for index users – an extravagant hope.

### ASI: 'Best practices for indexing'

Focusing on back-of-the-book indexes, 'Best practices for indexing' 'presents an overview of best indexing practices for creating accurate, effective, readable indexes. Its goal is 'to provide general guidelines rather than strict protocols, in recognition of the diversity of texts, disciplines, and index users.'

The guidelines offer definitions of the major components of an index – metatopic, main headings, subheadings, locators, entry array, cross-references, double-posts, headnotes, alphabetization and usability – and describe their function and application. Discipline-specific appendixes for cookbooks, children's books, K–12 textbooks, gardening and environmental texts, medical indexing, scholarly texts, software books and trade books follow, and further appendixes may be added in the future.

In terms of an indexer's ethical responsibility to the reader (to create an accurate and complete index) and the profession (to follow best practices), this document offers superb guidance.

### Employer codes

In addition to professional codes of conduct, in-house indexers must comply with employer codes of ethics. For example, as Julie McClung and Rosalind Guldner outlined in their presentation on ethical practices at the 2015 ISC/SCI conference, Hansard indexers must comply with codes of ethics for both public service employees in general and legislature employees specifically.

## Personally speaking: dilemmas faced by the individual indexer

Indexers face ethical dilemmas when there is conflict between one area of ethical responsibility and another.

### Censorship

The issue of censorship or index bias is probably the ethical problem that most often comes up for indexers. Censorship in indexing ranges from selective or deliberate exclusion of entries in the index to having no index at all. Publishers may request censorship on economic grounds, as part of their marketing strategy, because of the cultural beliefs of the anticipated readership or because of author requests.

For example, I based one of my conference scenarios for discussion on a real case where a publisher asked an indexer to include every mention, no matter how trivial, of a particular culture and its creation myth, but not to include any references to evolution, even though the author did describe it briefly in relation to different world views. Here, the indexer's responsibility to the client (working to the client's specifications) conflicted with responsibility to the profession (not following best practices), readers (not

accurately reflecting the contents) and self (not providing a best-quality index).

That scenario was based on a question from the Indexer's Discussion Group in 1995, but a very similar dilemma was raised in early 2015 on index-l, when Canadian indexer Stephen Ullstrom asked about political correctness and how indexers should approach books on colonialism: 'Should indexers try to remain neutral by reflecting the text, should we always accede to the author/editor's agenda, or should we proactively take a stand and try to correct historical injustices through the index?' Responses from other indexers varied, although most generally agreed that it is best to base the index on the text and to use cross-references as needed. Compounding his dilemma, the two books in question were anthologies, one spanning 130 years, so terminology changed considerably over time, and the other with contributions from several First Nation authors who themselves tended to use the older colonial names for their tribes and nations (such as Blackfoot instead of Niitsitapi). Ullstrom concluded:

> I think part of this, beyond the indexing, is figuring out how to deal with authors and editors for whom these issues are very politically or emotionally charged, and who don't understand that the index should reflect the text. They see instead, perhaps, an opportunity to set a good example, or to right a wrong, or to show their politically correct credentials, or, for a press or institution, to reflect the institution's position on the issue. The index is, as with any text, a public statement.

I am so glad he said all that. It reflects the continuing importance of indexes, and it indicates why we need to make our codes of ethics visible not just to ourselves, but to our clients and the world at large.

### Text antithetical to the indexer's beliefs

Closely related to the issue of political correctness is the problem of indexing a text that includes ideas or language that offend the indexer's own beliefs. Best practices call for using the terminology of the book itself and for accurately reflecting the content.

If an indexer feels strongly about a particular issue and the book takes an opposing stance, it is of course better not to take on that job. But what if you have already taken it on before you realize this opposition? What if time is tight for the publisher? You have a responsibility to the client to do the job, and to do it well. You have a responsibility to the author to accurately reflect their work. But can you provide a good index when the information grates on your personal beliefs?

This dilemma has no easy answer, but it might have been prevented by better communication about the project before it moved from 'potential' to 'accepted'.

### Quality issues in another's work

It does tend to happen in our profession that we see each other's work. We may take over the indexing of a series, for example, or we may be asked to do the index to a revision because the original indexer is unavailable. And sometimes we notice that there are quality issues with the other indexer's work.

Should we tell the client? Should we contact the other indexer? Should we tell other indexers? Should we keep mum? How does our responsibility to the profession apply here? What about responsibility to the client? What if we are asked to index this book in the series to follow the style of the previous indexes, and those don't follow best practices?

### The catch-22 of expertise

The problem of when to take on work outside our specific skill set or area of expertise inevitably arises, especially with newer indexers. We would be poor professionals indeed if we didn't improve over time, broadening our experience and competencies. But we also need to ensure that we don't take on work beyond what we can accomplish well.

Ongoing professional development is part of the answer; communication with the client is another part; knowing ourselves and understanding our own abilities is a third piece of this particular ethical puzzle.

### Other issues

We overestimate or underestimate because we err or the job has changed. We hire subcontractors, with or without a client's knowledge. A client puts down a colleague, or a colleague puts down a client. Questions arise about copyright, about liability, about plagiarized material identified by the indexer. The list goes on.

## Conclusion

Indexers encounter ethical dilemmas far more frequently than people might expect, some small, some large.

They are dilemmas because there is no one correct response, no one moral high ground. There are resources, however. The SI 'Code of professional conduct' offers a broad set of ethical principles. I recommend that every indexer read them. The ASI Best Practices guideline offers a thorough set of basic indexing principles. Read those, too. The online discussion groups, including our society-specific forums, offer immediate help from colleagues. Keep using them to raise these issues.

As individuals and within our societies, we need to talk about the sorts of ethical issues that can arise and what options are available for dealing with them. By thinking and talking about these issues, we not only increase our individual readiness to respond appropriately in a given situation, we also enhance our overall professionalism as a body.

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**Articles and items from The Indexer**

*The Indexer* contains a great many articles, letters and other items relevant to ethics in indexing. Please see its indexes at www.theindexer.org/contents/indexing-practice.htm and www.theindexer.org/contents/onlineindex.htm. Here are a few I found of particular interest.

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*Heather Ebbs has been indexing, editing and writing for more than 30 years and has indexed over 700 books, journals and reports in a wide variety of subjects and disciplines. A past president of ISC/SCI, she is currently International Liaison for the society. Email: hlebbs@gmail.com.*

# Website indexing

## *Mary Coe and Alexandra Bell*

*Website indexing may be done using multiple methods and tools, but the basic art of indexing still applies. As websites are often organic and constantly changing, the work of the web indexer is never done. In fact, the need for website indexing may only increase in the near future as new initiatives for collating and linking data appear.*

Web indexing includes the use of search engines and metadata, the organization of web links, and the creation of website indexes (Browne and Jermey, 2004: 136). While all of these features can be considered separately, they often work together, with the common aim of helping users to find online information. This article considers indexing within individual websites, not how large search engines, such as Google, trawl the World Wide Web.

There are several methods of website indexing:

- creation of back-of-book (BOB)-style indexes (often called A–Z indexes) within websites
- application of keywords to metadata fields in web pages
- construction of thesauri or taxonomies for various uses in websites.

## Back-of-book style indexes

Browne and Jermey (2004: 126) define BOB-style indexing as the 'creation of a website index that looks and functions like a back-of-book index. It will usually be alphabetically organised, give detailed access to information, and contain

index entries with subheadings and cross-references.' They argue that BOB-style indexes on websites offer the user the advantage of direct access to specific subjects of interest and the ability to browse for a quick coverage of the content on a website. They also note that such indexes are in a format that is familiar to most users (Browne and Jermey, 2004: 3–4). In most cases, entries in this type of index are



Web and Electronic Indexing Special Interest Group
Web Dictionary of Cybernetics and Systems
Web indexing
    about
    *Beyond Book Indexing* (Rowland and Brenner)
    discussion group
    *Indexing Specialties: Web Sites* (Hedden)
    and metadata
    Web and Electronic Indexing SIG
    *Website Indexing* (Browne and Jermey)

**Figure 1** From the ASI website index