

Doesn't a Computer do it?

by Tracy Wilson-Burns

When I mention to people that I'm an indexer, they invariably ask, "What's that?" After I explain what an indexer does, they ask, "But I thought computers created indexes automatically?"

Computers don't. They can't. And here's an illustration to show why.

Let's say a stay-at-home dad writes a home improvement book on organizing children's rooms to prevent clutter. In the first chapter, he writes:

"The clutter in our house was weighing on us. When my wife and I realized what pigs our teenagers were turning into, we knew we had to lay down the law. But we also knew that policing our kids regarding their tidiness would be as effective as demanding straight-A's. We had to do something to facilitate organization in our home."

Now, a software program might look at that paragraph and extract "clutter", "weight", "wife", "pigs", "teenagers", "law", "policing", "tidiness", "effectiveness", "facilitation", "organization" and "home". If it were very sophisticated, it might extract "knowledge". Let's just focus on the keyword "pigs" for this example. The software would likely construct the following index entries from "pigs":

- boars
- domestic animals
- farm animals
- hogs
- livestock
- pigs
- swine
- ungulates, even-toed

Obviously, there's a problem here. The author meant "pigs" as in "slobs", not "pigs" as in animals belonging to a genus of even-toed ungulates.

Maybe the computer software is smart enough to have figured that out. It saw the reference to clutter and made the connection between "pigs" and "slobs". We now have (using Windows thesaurus as an example):

- good-for-nothings
- lazybones's
- Ne'er-do-wells
- pigs
- scalawags

slobs
wasters

You can see the problem, right? Who, while reading a how-to book on de-cluttering the home, is going to look up an entry in the index for “scalawags”?

But maybe the software missed the connection between pigs and slobs and drew a connection between pigs and weight (“The clutter in our house was *weighing* on us.”) We’d now have index entries like:

fatness
diet
heaviness
nutrition
overweight people
obesity
people, large
people, overweight
population, weight issues in
pigs
weight, issues with
weight loss

Or maybe the software focused on the terms “law” and “policing” and arrived at:

civil disturbance
civil servants
cops
law enforcement
national security
pigs
policemen

The problem is even worse than what the software has put in the above example indexes. The software shouldn’t have indexed “pigs” at all! The author’s mention of his teenagers is simply an explanation of what motivated him to write the book. It does not belong in the index. Who, reading a home improvement book, would go to the index to look up the motivation of the author?

Computers and software can aid indexers in creating high quality indexes. There are software programs designed specifically for indexers to use. But indexes can’t be created at the press of a button. They require the dedicated analysis and expertise of professionals educated and experienced in the art of creating indexes.