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Interview: Janet Russell and AACR2

Janet Russell is the recipient of the 2004 A.S.I.–H. W. Wilson Award for her index to *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, Second Edition, 2002 Revision (2003 Update)*. Speaking for the A.S.I. committee, Janet Perlman commented: “The Wilson jury felt that the index exhibited excellence in its accuracy, completeness, and ease of use. The index had a level of complexity matching that of the document, and the indexer’s use of the text’s language reflected good indexing practice and anticipated the needs of its primary users: cataloguers.”

How long have you been indexing books? What is your professional background?

I have been indexing since 1989. I taught myself indexing while working on projects for a library consulting firm. I retain a librarian’s curiosity about everything and reverence for the First Amendment. Most of my work has been for library science publishers, but I have also indexed for scholarly presses, consulting firms, and my Tai Chi teacher. I finally got to use my BA in American Studies by indexing a book on America’s lawyer-presidents, but I have yet to find a project that uses my knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs. I went to library school at the University of Chicago and stayed in Chicago in a variety of library settings; I moved back to my native California in 1995 to be closer to my family. I’m currently co-president of the Golden Gate Chapter of ASI. When not indexing, I spin and weave, practice Tai Chi, read, volunteer with several local organizations serving the elderly, and help my mother as needed. My primary responsibility, however, is providing food for my cat, Cloud.

What is AACR2 and who uses it?

The *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* specify how resources (I can’t say just books any more) are listed in library catalogs everywhere in the English-speaking world. It also influences the way resources are listed in non-English speaking libraries. Library catalogs bring together all the works by a particular author, all the editions of a particular work, and all the works on a particular topic. Librarians have to manage immense amounts of information and therefore

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have to impose strict uniformity on the way resources are listed in their catalogs. In return, it is easy for users to find out what materials are in libraries all over the world, and often, to borrow them.

One of the reasons indexers and editors are concerned about listing names “properly” is that the reader may want to find more about a person or corporate body mentioned in a text by consulting a library catalog. How convenient for the reader if the name in the index and the name in the library catalog are the same. In library school I thought of it as how the catalogers hid the books. It was my job as reference librarian to find them.

Although many people are affected by AACR2, very few people actually use it. Catalogers at the Library of Congress and other national libraries decide how books will be listed, and other libraries buy the cataloging information from bibliographic utilities. As I indexed, I was always thinking of the users, harassed by growing backlogs and shrinking budgets. I hope that having an index they can trust will make their workday a little easier.

How did the different needs of various reader groups influence the design of the index?

My biggest concern for all users was establishing trust, especially with the ones who had used the old index. Although its title and bulk suggest that AACR2 covers every situation a cataloger could encounter, in practice it is skimpy in some areas and obsessively detailed in others. For example, someone scanning the old index might subconsciously note the large number of entries for the detailed areas, say Indonesian names, and assume that the text covers all languages similarly. It doesn't. The first draft of my index included many of the details of Indonesian names (*adat* titles, *Sri* elements) that only cluttered an already dense index. I took them out. Anyone who knew enough to look up “*adat*” would know enough to look up “Indonesian names.” Some of the frustration with the old index was actually frustration with the text. I couldn't change the text, but I could give users a reasonable expectation of the coverage of AACR2.

I saw three groups of readers for the index:

- 1) Experienced catalogers with an item in hand who knew AACR2 well and would be checking on tiny details or reviewing general principles for a format they were less familiar with.



For them I used the exact terminology of the rules, arcane as it can get (Artefacts not intended primarily for communication?!, Names not conveying the idea of ?!), and was of course meticulous about double-posting.

2) Users who are less familiar with AACR2 and need cross-references. These include students and beginning catalogers who are still learning the rules and terminology. For them I put in cross-references such as the one from “Subtitles” to “Other title information.” Since the terminology is always changing, this group also includes old-timers who would welcome cross-references. When I was in library school, “continuing resources” were called serials and “electronic resources” didn’t exist. Overall, approximately 20% of the records in the index are cross-references.

3) Non-librarians such as indexers and editors who use AACR2 as a second opinion in areas where the *Chicago Manual of Style* (or Mulvany) don’t give sufficient guidance, especially foreign names. I kept in mind a posting on Index-L that complained: “AACR is mum on the subject [of Japanese names], at least according to the rather lousy index in the back.” I paid particular attention every time a foreign language was mentioned, in any context, and can guarantee that AACR2 does not cover Japanese names, although it does address Japanese ordinal numerals.

Do you therefore recommend that indexers should buy AACR2?

No. It’s expensive and takes up a lot of space. If you went to library school and have a copy left over, hold on to it, but otherwise it’s probably better to ask on Index-L, the e-mail discussion list.

Did you design your index from “scratch” or were you asked to follow the structure of the previous index? How much guidance were you given regarding the scope and content of the index?

ALA was able to give me the previous index in a machine-readable form that I was able to import into Cindex. This saved me a lot of typing, although I might have made some different decisions if I had started from scratch. The previous index had originally been compiled by a venerated member of the committee and patched by another and had attained the status of sacred scripture to some members of the committee. Nothing in AACR2 gets changed without

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much debate within the committee. I hoped to ease the process by making my index look as much like the old index as possible; I just wanted to make it more internally consistent.

The indexable material in AACR2 is exceptionally dense. How did you approach this? At times it must have seemed like everything was indexable!

This wasn't that much of a problem for me. I wrote guidelines before starting the index that were submitted to the committee for approval. So I had already specified that I would use the chapter divisions to divide the work as local main topics, that I would index down to the individual rules, and would pull out other indexable topics as needed. I am not of the “if it's a noun, it's indexable” school. I was always thinking, “Is anybody with a book (excuse me, resource) in hand ever going to ask for this?”

The problems came because parts of AACR2 are denser than others. Sometimes it was just a matter of literary style: one author would mention a few examples of royal titles in a foreign language (not indexable by my guidelines); another would list all of them (indexable). This resulted in an unbalanced index. The first draft of the index looked as if AACR2 was mainly about capitalization and Indonesian names. They came out in the second draft, but nobody has commented.

Was there enough space allotted for the index?

ALA has never given me a limit for the indexes I write for them. Actually, since the old index did include a lot of examples which I deleted, my index is actually a bit shorter than the old one, even with all the double-posting and cross-references.

Was there a review process for the index? Did you submit the index as a whole or in sections?

Was there ever! The completed index had to be approved by the committee that oversees AACR2 and was thus subjected to the debate and scrutiny given to any change in the text. However, they never questioned my basic strategy for selecting terms. They focused instead on typos and minor variations in wording that did not affect alphabetization, such as consistency in the use of “entry” rather than “entries” as a subentry. They may have had other problems with the index, but I didn't hear about them, because my editor at ALA, Mary Huchting, and her boss, Troy Linker, were very protective of me.

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ALA also asked two working catalogers to review the index. One reviewer (Robert Maxwell) was very helpful, suggesting some cross-references for terminology. I have Bob to thank for the cross-reference, “Relator terms, see Function, designations of.” AACR2 uses “Designations of function” to refer to terms such as “editor” or “adaptor,” but I was sure that working catalogers didn’t talk about “Designations of function.” He was also helpful in picking up some inconsistencies in wording and punctuation.

The other reviewer found a few more typos, but seemed more interested in lobbying for the job of indexing AACR2 herself, although several of her suggestions would have violated what I consider to be good indexing practice. I did put more detail into the index entries after seeing the reviewers’ comments. My normal indexing style is to give only enough information to get the reader to the location in the text. The reviewers persuaded me that it was a service to readers to give them a little more, to tell them that they would find only information about capitalization when they wanted information about the form of names.

The loose-leaf format for AACR2 allows for easy updating. Aside from the use of section/paragraph numbers for reference locators, were there other structural decisions that were made with index updating in mind?

AACR2 has always used the rule number as a locator in the index, even before it was issued in loose-leaf format, so using them here was no innovation. The only special consideration is that I am careful to keep backups of my master Cindex file, because I know I will be using it again next year.

One of the advantages of the continual updating is that I have the opportunity to incorporate improvements and correct mistakes in the next edition. The 2004 update has just been published and I have a file of changes for the 2005 update already started. So if anyone who uses AACR2 can’t find something in the index, I want to know. My email is JRUSSELL@ALUMNI.REED.EDU.

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