

What's Going On with Embedded Indexing?

Ebooks and the Future of Indexing(---ers)

BY STEVE INGLE



Steve Ingle is the president and CEO of WordCo Indexing Services (www.wordco.com), located in Norwich, Connecticut. He created his first index (8 lines) at the age of 10. After graduating from Yale University with a degree in German literature, he went on to earn master's degrees in German and Russian Area Studies. In 1988, Steve began freelance indexing part time while also working at the Modern Language Association (MLA) in New York. He began indexing full time in 1991. Steve has served on the national board of ASI. His company now employs a team of indexers and completes about 500 projects annually for a diverse group of clients. His interests include indexing as a business and indexes for digital publications.

Part One: The Current Reality and the (Future) Role of Indexers

We've heard the same refrain for years: publishing is going digital, and if you want to survive as an indexer you'd better be adept at digital (embedded) indexing. Maybe you took a class on InDesign and practiced creating embedded, reflowable indexes. Or you planned to work for one of those publishers that asked you to embed tags in Word files, so you learned about WordEmbed. But then the work didn't materialize.

The reality is that despite the hype, the digital revolution hasn't yet happened, at least as indexing of nonfiction is concerned. Print books continue to exist and are expected to be the **vast majority of sales for the foreseeable future**. And most digital book sales have been for **fiction, rather than nonfiction**. Moreover, most nonfiction eBooks are produced by simply "converting" their print equivalent. Because of the predominance of print in the nonfiction realm, the bulk of our indexing work has been as it always was: working from PDFs, creating a Word file, sending it off to the client. Speaking for myself, in 2015 less than 10% of WordCo's sales are expected to come from digital/embedded indexing.

Fifteen years ago, I never would have imagined that I would still be doing traditional indexing in 2015. I'm not complaining; I'm happy to have the work. But what happened? Why haven't digital nonfiction books taken off? And of the nonfiction eBooks published, why don't they all have decent, hyperlinked indexes? (Hmm, maybe there's even a connection between the lack of decent eBook indexes and the failure of nonfiction eBooks to really take off.) I believe there are several major factors that help explain this current reality:

1) The publishing industry is experiencing decreased profitability

This is hardly news, but see techcrunch.com, for example, if you want some details. Publishers have had to compete with free and low-cost learning resources available on the Internet. In 1995, if you wanted to brush up on your sales techniques, you bought the book; nowadays you're just as likely to Google it or watch a YouTube video. A law school professor may decide to dispense with the textbook on torts and just direct her students to relevant websites. And then there is self-publishing. Nonfiction books still sell, but as a result of this trend, publishers (and packagers) have had to figure out ways to get more for less. Most aspects of book production have been outsourced to less costly offshore alternatives. Fortunately, because of language issues, indexing has largely remained onshore, though many of us can attest to the downward pressure on rates. Most publishers simply are not willing to pay a premium to have the indexer meticulously tag files in InDesign or some other format.

2) Nonfiction eBooks, especially complex nonfiction like textbooks, are more difficult and costly to produce

Because of layout issues (figures, tables, sidebars, bold/italicized terms, etc.) there is just more involved in producing many nonfiction eBooks. In particular, **indexes** add a layer of complexity to nonfiction eBooks that just is not an issue with fiction eBooks.

3) Publishers are ignorant about indexes and indexing

The eBook index is just one other thing publishers don't have time to figure out how to do right and do cost-effectively. Even if they have

the money to pay for an eBook index, they don't always know how to go about it. How does embedded indexing fit into their workflow? Why doesn't indexing in InDesign work more smoothly? Even worse, some publishers are ignorant of the value of the index in an eBook. They believe [gasp!] eBooks don't need indexes.

What's an indexer to do? Should we just wait around until our customers tell us exactly how to proceed?

No! Which brings me to factor #4. . .

4) For the most part, indexers have not yet taken the initiative in suggesting alternative workflows

We need to understand exactly what value we provide to publishers; educate our customers about this value and how it is relevant to digital books; and figure out cost-effective ways of providing this value, and then selling it to our customers. This is a new role for many of us.

We can begin, where necessary, by selling our customers on the value of indexes in general, and especially in eBooks. They need to know that the index is much more than a search tool, allowing you to "look something up." The index provides an overview of the book, a detailed meta-version of the contents, if you will. The index is for "browsing" as much as for locating specific information. It's a marketing tool: users can scan the index to see if the book contains the type of information they're looking for; publishers can potentially use the index to make the book more "searchable" online. The electronic Search function is no substitute for an index; the user may not know exactly what they are looking for in the first place. In a

digital book, the index can have the added advantage of hyperlinking to specific text locations, as well as allowing flexibility of index formats (for example, collapsible headings, or perhaps categories of headings). At the very least, users of nonfiction eBooks have a right to expect an index, especially if the print version of the book already includes an index. A digital, hyperlinked index has the potential to give added value to the eBook, encouraging users to migrate from print.

As indexers, we need to shift from freelancer mode to publishing-professional mode. We need to come up with standards (the EPUB3 indexing spec is a great start, thanks to ASI's own Digital Trends Task Force!). But on an immediately practical level, we need to develop efficient procedures for facilitating the creation and inclusion of quality eBook indexes. The lack of such procedures has been one of the main impediments to the proliferation of high-quality indexes in eBooks and indexers' inability to capitalize on this potential. Part II of this article will focus on why eBook indexing "solutions" have largely been inadequate up to now, and suggest some alternative approaches. Efficient digital indexing workflows, coupled with client education and indexer advocacy, can help start shifting the tide. Just because the revolution hasn't yet occurred, doesn't mean it won't happen. There are definitely opportunities out there for enterprising indexing professionals!

Part Two of "What's Going On with Embedded Indexing?" will appear in the December 2015 ASI Key Words. ●

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