

Odd, Wonderful entries – with a purpose

I was reading the index to Everything is Miscellaneous, by David Weinberger. The book is about new ways of organizing data in the digital era, and the power of users being able to tag data for their own needs, versus traditional (physical world) ways of data organization.

I came across this index entry: everything, in book ,1-277. *A cute little indexer joke*, I thought. Then I started seeing entries that seemed more bizarre.

names of people

- initials as both first and middle
- that are also animals
- that are also roles or positions
- that are also things,
- wonderful

people

- anonymous
- knighted
- with middle or one name
- with only one name
- you want to be

It doesn't make sense! Or does it? These entries in the otherwise traditional, professionally prepared, index actually demonstrate the point David Weinberger makes in the text. If he has an interest in names and the ways people represent themselves, he tags those references in a way that is meaningful to him.

David Weinberger is a fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Centre for the Internet & Society. I learned much from this book, more than I can describe in this short article, but here are some of the concepts.

Weinberger explains the three orders of, well, order. The first is when you organize physical things themselves, for instance, a spice rack. You can only put the jar of oregano in one place. The second order is when you separate the information from the object itself, like a card catalogue. There are limitations to the number of key words that can realistically be used, and of course, the book itself can only be shelved in one location. The third order of order occurs when the content is digital and so is the information about it. Unbound by the physical world, you can tag information any way that is relevant to you. So, yes, in a book about the digital organization of information, of course you can tag names of people that are also animals. You, personally, may want to go back and find them.

In a very readable style, Weinberger touches on the evolution of classification from alphabetization through S.R. Ranganathan (whose name has initials as first and middle), to thesauri to online retailing, tagging (as in delicious.com) to UPC and related systems to folksonomies.

In the digital age, the power of information and the individual needs of users meet in these four strategic principles:

1. Filter on the way out, not on the way in.
2. Put each leaf on as many branches as possible
3. Everything is metadata and everything is a label (You can Google Shakespeare to find the text of his plays or you can Google a quotation to find out which play it is from.)
4. Give up control.

Weinberger quotes Tim Falconer, a Semantic Web expert who sees the success of the Semantic Web as requiring a degree of “pragmatic looseness.” That is, not a top-down taxonomy specifying everything that can be said or done, but a bottom-up, mostly-right creation that is useful though imperfect. Indexing and taxonomy consultant Seth Maislin is quoted talking about “lumping and splitting” and how they lead us to create conceptual trees.

Weinberger explains many of the features and functions of the Web that have transformed the ways we work and acquire knowledge from information. For example, the Public Library of Science and PLoS One were started by respected journal editors who wanted to put more articles in the public domain than could be reviewed and published traditionally.

Everything is Miscellaneous is really a great read for indexers and anyone interested in new ways of handling information. It was enthusiastically received by many prominent reviewers. Not all reviewers agreed with Weinberger’s points, of course.

I am not sure if the following index entry was created by the author or the indexer, but it was a giggle too. Both Debra Messing and Diane von Furstenburg were mentioned in passing as celebrities, in a context that was obviously not indexable... but they ended up in the index. I guess this entry absolves the indexer! How *do* you keep your reputation as a professional indexer when the author is goofin’ around!

index, entries that should not have been included
everything
Messing, Debra
PenisLand.com (PenIsland.com)
von Furstenburg, Diane

The index for Everything is Miscellaneous was prepared by Lisa Kleinholz, who is an indexer and a novelist. In her indexing experience, occasionally Lisa has been asked to include unusual index entries if the author feels it helps to make a point. She told me that as an indexer, she tends to “err on the side of inclusiveness” and if there is a debatable entry she lets the author edit it out if necessary. This index was a reversal – the author adding his own extra, odd entries. Lisa said that she enjoyed indexing the book “because it was actually about the organization of information itself, and how to look at information in different ways. I enjoyed it more as a researcher because I do a lot of research, and he had some interesting ways to approach that.”

Besides the fact that I am an indexing student, the reason I read the index so thoroughly was to capture many of the concepts and specific website names that were mentioned throughout the book, for my own follow-up. I am now using delicious.com, a service I had previously heard of but not understood the power of. So the book functions both as a teacher of concepts and a practical explanation of interesting and useful parts of the Web. He respects all those who have come before. In fact, Everything is Miscellaneous is dedicated “To the librarians.”

Everything is Miscellaneous was published by Times Books in 2007. On the blog www.everythingismiscellaneous.com, you can read further discussion, watch a neat YouTube video featuring some of the concepts, and download podcasts of interviews with “very smart people”.

By the way, the “wonderful name” is Freiherr Samuel von Pufendorf. “People you want to be” refers to the way one self-edits for public consumption when listing hobbies and interests on social networking sites.