Oh Brave New World, That Has Such Indexers In It!

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When, in 2999, the next millennial indexing anthology comes to be written, they will look back at our own time with respect. For it will be the period when indexers emerged from their Dark Ages. Previously monochromatic inhabitants of a book's nether regions, dwellers in an ancillary world of add-on volumes, occasional issues, and loose-leaf inserts, and resigned to being omitted, curtailed, or ignored, the 21st century offered a new era of world presence. Indexers to the front, in colour, with flashing lights, always unmissable, never omissible.

Not in books, of course. On screens. Look at the Internet search engines now, and you are presented with an indexer's world - though often hardly recognizable because of its amateurishness. It will not take you long to spot every error in indexing practice. You will howl at the lop-sided commercially-driven idiosyncrasies of the knowledge classifications used to provide ways of accessing Web data. But, at the same time, the recognition that at last people have discovered the importance of explicit, up-front systems of information retrieval must send a satisfied nod around the chins of every true-born indexer.

There are amazing opportunities here, within this rapidly growing domain of 'knowledge management'. And a crying need for orthodox indexing practice and experience - the kind of awareness which can come only from knowing the pitfalls of indexing specialist areas. Every topic which The Indexer has ever dealt with is here writ large - and complicated by the fact that Web pages may be in any language (over 500 there now) and provide entry into vast databases, which may of course have been indexed already. The Web is a vast exploratory domain for the field which may one day be called 'comparative indexology'.

The indexer's discipline proves to be a lifeline when working in uncharted territory. And no territory has ever been so uncharted. It is also a territory where traditional indexing expectations can be
All of this is indeed a new world, for the traditional indexer – coping with hypertext links, relating index entries to classified domains, devising sensible techniques of search assistance, coping with procedures of censorship, implementing new codes of practice. But it is a world which must be embraced, because the need for professional indexing is as urgent when the pages are electronic as when they are paper. It is indeed a brave new world, and if it is to function efficiently it must have indexers in it.