

Certification: a rational approach by Michael E. Jackson

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The purpose of this article is to examine the issue of certification for indexers. Recent discussions online, at the Minneapolis conference, and, no doubt, within our various chapters have been tense at best and often inflammatory. Having listened to some of these arguments for and against certification it has come as a surprise to this indexer to learn of the intensity of feelings on both sides of the issue. This article will not make a decision either way, but rather present the reader with some of the pros and cons both from a global and also from a personal perspective.

As indexers, we are faced with a challenge when we look at each new text. We receive the manuscript, read the title and contents, and immediately begin to get a general concept of what the book is about. Then, when reading through the text carefully, we select our concepts and decide on our entry. At some stage, depending on one's individual style, we edit our work which entails making sure we have been faithful to the author's intentions and eliminating inconsistencies and redundancies (in the index rather than the text.)

So, let us take this approach with the decision we need to make about whether or not we should be certified as indexers. What is our "text" in this issue? I see this as our own personal stage in indexing as a profession. Are we beginners or experienced, full-time or part-time, employed or freelance, young or semi-retired, raising small children or living alone? We can each add any other factors that we face in our own lives. In addition to personal backgrounds, all of the foregoing is set against a backdrop of the global environment. What is happening not only in the US but also in the rest of the world? What is our competition?

The following table gives a brief summary of world population with details for countries with indexing communities. The US may indeed be a world leader in publishing but we may overlook the fact that the remainder of the English-speaking world is not only well established but, with the burgeoning Internet, poised to swamp the US. How can this be, that we Americans are not aware of this? Well, to offer a parallel example, it has taken at least a century for the vast majority of the British public to come to terms with the loss of Empire. Public opinion is slow to come to terms with reality.

Indexing countries	Total population in millions. <small>(July 2010 est. per www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gm.html)</small>	Percentage of World Population	Indexing Membership
China	1,330	19.47%	n/a
India	1,173	17.2%	4 (ASI

			members)
USA	310	4.55%	682
Germany	82	1.2%	28
UNITED KINGDOM	61	0.9%	554
South Africa	49	0.7%	178
CANADA	34	0.5%	56
AUSTRALIA	22	0.3%	107
Netherlands	17	0.2%	7
NEW ZEALAND	4	0.06%	See Australia above
Other Countries	3,748	54.9%	
World Total	6,830	100%	

To clarify the above statistics on membership, I should explain that there is a degree of overlap. At least 20 Canadians are known to be members of ASI and, presumably are also members of the Canadian society (ISC/SCI). There are four Indian members of ASI. New Zealand figures are included with Australia and separate details were not readily available from the Australia/New Zealand society (ANZSI). The Chinese society's (CSI) web site is only in Chinese and I did not receive a response to my inquiry. The South African society (ASAIB) looks relatively large but includes bibliographers. The German society (DNI) includes two German speaking ASI members. I do not have specific details, but one must also take into account that some society members are organizations and individual membership is divided between full- and part-time indexers.

It comes as a shock to many of my students to realize that roughly one in three people on our planet is either Indian or Chinese. In the above population statistics, I have included countries which already have indexing societies but ranked them per the relative size of their general population. Countries, capitalized, are those that already have forms of certification for their indexers. Note that this includes the USA, the difference being that neither of the two US certificates are mandatory (ASI and Institute of Certified Indexers (ICI). India is a special case and one to be watched closely.

At present there is no society of indexers in India but Indian indexers are joining other English-speaking societies in increasing numbers. (There are four Indian indexers in ASI; numbers of Indians in SI were not available) and many reckon that it is only a matter of time before we see the formation of an Indian society unless of course, they decide to await the imminent arrival of international webinars and find they have no need for their own society. We only need to note the growing numbers of excellent Indian/American-born-/Canadian-born-/British-born-Indian novelists and experience for ourselves the out-sourcing of English-speaking phone services, to understand the potential from the Sub-Continent. (Rohinton Mistry – *A Fine Balance*; Vikram Seth – *Sacred Games*; Amitav Ghosh – *A Sea of Poppies*; Arundhati Roy – *The God of Small Things*; Jhumpa Lahiri – *The Namesake*, Kiran Desai – *The Inheritance of Loss*, are just a few that spring to mind.)

If Indians are writing novels that are being acclaimed in the West, then we can be sure that many are writing non-fiction. Non-fiction requires indexing, and so it should not come as a surprise to learn that our British colleagues are expecting India to be the next country to set up a society of indexers. I have it on good verbal authority that the “China Society of Indexers” is flourishing.

China is clearly a different sort of challenge being less of a concern to Americans linguistically. However, we would be unwise to ignore the potential threat to our employment in the long run. We may be guilty of instant gratification desires for our vacation snaps and even our return on investments, nevertheless, with our employment we should look to at least the span of our remaining anticipated careers in this field.

Thus it is apparent that we Americans have no room for complacency when it comes to considering both our current, and, more importantly, our potential competition. This applies to publishing and indexing as to any other profession. In conversations with other indexers, I have learned that many “packagers” are based in India. I leave it to the reader to surmise how that fact will play out with the increasing visibility of Indian indexers and the likely creation of an Indian Indexing Society. Meanwhile our British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand colleagues already offer certification to bring recognition of indexing standards to comparable levels with professional bankers, accountants, surveyors and many other occupations.

Indexing does not take place in a vacuum. We index in an environment greater than the physical constraints of our individual workplaces, one which stretches beyond national boundaries to the global economy. Many indexers freelance from their homes and can appreciate easily how political boundaries mean nothing when bidding for indexing projects.

So much for the current global background. Now for the question currently being hotly debated in the US, whether or not we need to get ourselves certified. For myself, as I thought about this issue, I began to realize that not only is the probable course of world events a major consideration – the macro perspective as an economist would say, but we need to consider our personal situations – the micro perspective.

The reason I consider that indexing certification is a very private matter is because each of us is in a different situation. It is neither desirable nor necessary to follow the majority in this matter. After considering our environment, we should take a look at our individual place in that environment. Factors for all of us to consider include our how much of our income is dependent on indexing, whether we only index or offer editing and related services, dependence on our income in this field or the existence of other sources of income (spousal income or pensions) that would support us if our current work should not continue.

Age is another major factor. For a young person trying to set up a career, I would expect a totally different decision on certification than for somebody approaching retirement, with a large portfolio of past indexes, extensive network of publishers and a solid track record. Your age and position in the indexing community will determine the degree of fear of potential change.

For anyone approaching the end of his or her professional working life, I doubt there is any advantage to be gained from obtaining certification. Either one is already a well established full-time indexer with more than adequate networks in the publishing industry, or one is only looking at indexing as a part-time career. In the latter situation, it is unlikely that the additional work and cost involved in striving for certification would be worthwhile. For a younger person, with a number of years of work-life still ahead and trying to break into indexing, there is a different situation.

Wherever you fit into this scenario then, like the process of indexing itself, you must think through and make a decision on your own. Each indexer should be well versed in making his or her own decision given the information available. That is, after all, what indexing is all about.

Key Words / Vol. 18, NO. 4