

The tyranny of the page

Mary Coe

Page (noun): a leaf or one side of a leaf, as of a book, letter, newspaper, or manuscript.¹

Mary Coe wonders what will happen to the page as books move away from print and into electronic format. Is the page a cruel ruler that we can easily do without or is it a necessary structure for peace and harmony? She predicts that readers need the page, or something like it, and that indexers will have a role to play in the new regime.

Pages of evolution

The page has ruled book indexing for a long time. As the format of books changes from paper to digital, is the reign of the page coming to an end? Do we want it to end? What will this regime change mean for indexers and readers? Is this our Arab Spring?

I am not the only one wondering where the page is going. In his article 'From scroll to screen' (2011), Lev Grossman writes:

Something very important and very weird is happening to the book right now: It's shedding its papery corpus and transmigrating into a bodiless digital form, right before our eyes. We're witnessing the bibliographical equivalent of the rapture. If anything we may be lowballing the weirdness of it all.

He notes that this is not the first time the reading experience has taken a new direction. Scrolls preceded the book as we know it today (the codex) and they certainly were not conducive to indexing, as Hans Wellisch notes in *Indexing from A to Z* (1991):

First, as long as books were written in the form of scrolls, there were neither page nor leaf numbers nor line counts (as we have them now for classical texts). Also, even had there been such numerical indicators, it would have been impractical to append an index giving exact references, because in order for a reader to consult the index, the scroll would have to be unrolled to the very end and then to be rolled back to the relevant page. (Whoever has had to read a book available only on microfilm, the modern successor of the papyrus scroll, will have experienced how difficult and inconvenient it is to go from the index to the text.) Second, even though popular works were written in many copies (sometimes up to several hundreds), no two of them would be exactly the same, so that an index could at best have been made to chapters or paragraphs, but not to exact pages. Yet such a division of texts was rarely done (the one we have now for classical texts is mostly the work of medieval and Renaissance scholars). Only the invention of printing around 1450 made it possible to produce identical copies of books in large numbers, so that soon afterwards the first indexes began to be compiled, especially those to books of reference, such as herbals.

Scrolls were replaced by the book (codex), which as Lev Grossman (2011) points out, 'created a very different reading experience':

With a codex, for the first time, you could jump to any point in a text instantly, nonlinearly. You could flip back and forth between two pages and even study them both at once. You could cross-check passages and compare them and bookmark them. You could skim if you were bored, and jump back to reread your favorite parts. It was the paper equivalent of random-access memory, and it must have been almost supernaturally empowering. With a scroll you could only trudge through texts the long way, linearly.

We have come a long way already – we have books in their present form, with page numbers and useful indexes. We can follow a nonlinear reading path, without having to unroll an entire scroll. These are definitely good features, but can they be improved upon? Do we still need to have the page itself or can we keep the best features of the codex without it?

A new kind of reading (and indexing) experience

Not only is the page disappearing, the reading experience itself seems to be changing (again). Edward Nawotka (2011) looked at development of 3D narrative apps for ebooks and wondered, 'Is non-linear reading the future of nonfiction e-reading?'

This type of non-linear 'reading' [combining print with links to graphics and resources] is perhaps more analogous to how we really learn than what we experience from reading a narrative nonfiction book. E-books – and apps in particular – promise this future. As readers become more accustomed to these 'enhancements,' they are likely to take them for granted. A plain old book that offers footnotes, appendices and indexes will begin to seem cumbersome and inconvenient in comparison.

I have been thinking about this topic for the past few years, but two recent experiences have brought it to the forefront of my mind. In the first instance, I wrote an index for a major publisher using its proprietary dynamic indexing system. In this dynamic system, locators are provided within the text

of a Word document. I do not have to create the locators or embed entries. I am free to work on the index in my software (CINDEX™), simply entering the locators into the Page field as I normally would enter a page number. I can mark ranges with a hyphen, use italics or bold, or *t* and *f* to indicate tables and figures. The locators are at various positions in the text, mostly at the paragraph but sometimes at sub-paragraph level or word level. The index can be generated from these locators to pull out and create final page numbers or other locator system formats. Other than the need to pay close attention as I enter these specialized locators, it fits seamlessly into my usual work pattern. The system integrates with the client's publishing workflow and allows me to begin working on an index earlier in the production process than if I have to wait for final pages. (It seems like a luxury now to have so much time to work. Will I reach a point in the future where I take this time for granted? I can envision the horrified faces of new indexers as I tell them about the 'bad old days' when we often had two weeks or less to write a book index!)

As I work in the dynamic system, beetling along through the text, keying my index entries into Cindex, thinking 'oh, yes, piece of cake!' I hit an entry that starts at the bottom of one 'page' (in the Word document) and continues on to the next 'page.' I pause for a second, then enter the locator, a hyphen, and the locator in the paragraph on the second 'page.' I wonder whether, in the final product, this ranging will be necessary – will this end up being on only one page of a printed book? I am so conditioned to thinking in terms of pages that I have to consciously remind myself to turn the material into paragraphs (or even smaller units) in my mind. The work becomes more fiddly. I can't just auto-carry-forward page numbers or simply add a hyphen and the next page number in the Page field for a range; instead, I have to pay strict attention to the specific locators. I have to track not only the numbers of the locators but where they are located in the text, regardless of where they might happen to be when Word paginates a document. That Word pagination has nothing to do with the final pagination. The page as I know it is dead! I miss it.

This client's dynamic system was not the first time that I had indexed to a locator other than a page number. I have done legal indexing to paragraph numbers, database indexing to journal articles and documents, and embedded indexing and indexing of books using 'IDs' or 'unique numbers' within systems such as the CUP-XML system. But, somehow, this dynamic system made me hyper-aware that I am headed into a new regime, one that ignores the page. I have no doubt that I will be seeing more systems like it, and I am going to have to get the concept of the page as I know it out of my mind.

I think that the main problem with this dynamic system was dealing with mixed media. While I was working in the dynamic environment, I did not know whether the final product would be print or digital or both. I still had to think about the page to some extent, without being able to think in the context of the page. In general, this seems to be the case as we transition from pbooks (print books) to ebooks (electronic books). I just heard anecdotally that a major publisher is planning to distribute a book as a pbook with a traditional

index as well as in an ebook format, including an 'index of searchable terms,' which would be the pbook's index without the page numbers. It is probably the best they can do until they figure out better ways to publish, but it reveals both a staggering ignorance of what an index actually is, and an acceptance of a very poor-quality product. I pity the poor indexer, trying to create indexes for both formats. While it might be possible to reuse the pbook index somewhat, the indexer would either have to create many cross-references from concepts to 'searchable terms,' or give up entirely on alternative terminology and conceptual entries, and limit the index to keywords. Either case creates more work for the poor reader. Who wants to lose multiple access points to the material, or follow cross-reference after cross-reference to find a usable keyword, then search, crossing their fingers and hoping that the first instance is the one that they want?

Serving the new reader

What will the demise of the page mean for readers? Obviously, from these examples of the dynamic indexing process and ebook indexes, it is going to cause a bit of grief for the poor reader in the short term. I do not think that readers will miss the page itself, but they will care if they cannot find what they want in the text.

Not long after my dynamic indexing project, I worked on an index for a high-school science textbook. I asked my daughter, a high-school student, to review the index with me for usability. I was humbled to learn that not only did she not understand my intention when I used *see also* cross references, she really did not care about locator spans. She just wanted to go to the page where the topic started. We discussed ebook indexes hypothetically, and while she would accept a 'locator' (hyperlink) that took her to the paragraph level, she would absolutely prefer a link to the line level, or better yet, word level. She had no problem with pages disappearing – in fact, having to find something on an entire page is too much work. She wants to go straight to the point. The page is dead, and the next generation won't miss it!

If future readers and today's nonlinear readers are not even going to stay on the page for long, then we certainly do not need the page. But, who is going to create all these wonderful links? Hmm, this is information retrieval in another form. Is this a job for authors? Editors? Researchers? Oh, of course – indexers!

It seems to me that if we abandon a linear reading path entirely, indexes will be even more necessary. The primitive search tools in current ebook readers can barely cope now, even with a page-based format. How is a reader going to find information in a 3D, resource-rich, non-page-based ebook? It could all just become too overwhelming. Peter Meyers, in his excellent blog newkindofbook.com, wonders about the cognitive value of the page:

The obvious answer, for me at least, is that each page divides a book's huge volume into smaller, more manageable parts. In the same way that hikers and long distance runners often focus on shorter-term, interim goals – get to the bridge; cross the bridge; etc. – readers benefit from the short span of pages & spreads.

Maybe we won't call it a *page* any more, but we still need to chunk information into useful bites.

This is true not only for books but for any source of information. As Mitch Kapor famously said, 'Getting information off the Internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant.'² Internet users accept that they need a search engine to find information. Search engines usually link to websites, which have web pages. So maybe we really do need 'pages,' whatever we choose to call them. I predict that ebooks will have something like 'pages,' not only because readers are used to that format, but because we inherently need the page to process information. Maybe we need to rest between absorbing chunks of information, and we look for visual cues to help us. Some are paragraphs, some are pages, some are chapters. Where can we stop reading linearly?

Perhaps it is also time to step back and examine why we read. I have heard a lot of talk about the reading experience, mostly from people who do not want to give up paper books. They like the way the book feels in their hands. They like the white space, the careful design of the typography and line lengths, the look and smell of the page. Most reviews of ebook readers talk about what it feels like to hold the reader and how easy (or not) it is to move between 'pages' on the screen. Reading is a kinaesthetic and emotional experience as much as an intellectual one, and perhaps the 'page' is part of this. If we are to give up the 'page,' then indexes may be even more valuable as a way to enhance the reading experience. How else are we to make sense of reflowable and seemingly endless content? We can jump around in a nonlinear fashion, but once we get where we want to be (even if just for the moment), our reading path is usually linear and very dependent upon context. The question will be, what do we call this new 'page' and how do we index to it?

Maybe paragraphs are the answer? Readers might have the option of turning paragraph numbers on or off in their ebook reader. Teachers could direct a class to turn to 'paragraph 26.5' instead of 'page 50.' Indexers could work at the paragraph level and link entries to the beginning of each paragraph. Instead of thinking of page ranges, we would think in terms of paragraph ranges. Many dynamic indexing systems seem to be heading this way. And, with luck, it will be 'good enough' for the next generation of readers, like my daughter. She will at least consider it an improvement on page-level indexing.

The quality argument

The demise of the page could be a good thing for indexers and readers, and if handled properly, a good thing for the publishing industry in general. Slapping together ebooks with reflowable content and no way to navigate through the text just is not good enough. It may be cheap and fast, but is that really where we want to go? I hate the idea that quantity and cost matter more than quality. This 'quantity not quality' rationale saw the demise of the small bookseller in favour of the big chain and online book retailers. At that time, people said that they would miss their local bookstore (much like they are saying now that they will

miss holding a paper book). But did people care enough to put their money where their mouth was and save those local bookstores? In most cases, no, they didn't. In many ways, the bigger retailers have tried to emulate some of the better features of small booksellers, such as book reviews and 'if you liked this, you might like . . . ' features. You can sign in to Amazon to get 'personalized recommendations' and before you buy a Kindle edition of a book, you can read a sample first. Now, before you actually buy a cheaper book, you can read a review, sample it, and find others like it.

Maybe this trend will work with ebook indexes as well. Once readers become comfortable with the idea of ebooks and start using them, they might start to notice that some of the better features of pbooks that are missing, such as useful indexes. Perhaps they will note the missing features in online reviews. Perhaps they will start searching for ebooks that offer those basic features, or enhancements, such as indexing to the paragraph level instead of to the page level. I hope indexers will be able to stay the course and still be providing good indexes when this happens, rather than sadly shutting up shop in defeat.

Dr Barry Jones, in his prologue to the Australian Book Industry Strategy Group final report (2011), writes:

The digital revolution should be welcomed, and the publishing industry should be moving fast to adapt to and embrace it. However, we should not be looking at publishing in isolation, but in its relationship to culture and education in general.

Similarly, indexers should not think about indexing in isolation. We are at a crossroads when it comes to index usability. We are in a unique position to promote indexes as navigation and semantic tools. We should not only interact with the publishing industry to encourage creation of good ebook indexes, we should actively work to inspire readers to demand them. And perhaps it is the next generation, like my daughter, who can help us do this. How about updating that wonderful old ASI bumper sticker: 'If you don't talk to your kids about ebook indexes, who will?'

The demise of the page may be the end of one era, but it could be the beginning of an even better one – for indexers, readers, and publishers.

The page is dead. Long live the page.

Postscript

I wrote the first draft of this article while watching cricket. Anyone who knows cricket knows that this is possible, though I am sure a few diehard cricket fans are also gasping in horror. You would think that cricket in the modern era of limited attention spans and instant gratification would have already died a lonely death. Not so. In fact, the game of cricket is thriving throughout the world. It is thriving not only in its traditional longer forms but also in new, shortened forms designed to attract the younger audience. In the shortened form, it is still cricket, but it has left the book, or, dare I say it, the page, behind. Indian Premier League is cricket at the paragraph level.

Big hits, non-stop action, cheerleaders, music – it takes you straight to the point! If cricket can evolve, so can we.

Notes

- 1 From www.thefreedictionary.com
- 2 The derivation of this quote is discussed on http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/archived_content/people/reagle/inet-quotations-19990709.html

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Mary Coe has been indexing professionally for 20 years. When she is not reading for work, she is reading for pleasure. She is not comfortable unless she has a stack of print books by her bed waiting for her, or her ebook reader in her purse (just in case she gets a minute to read). Originally from Washington, DC, she now lives and works in Sydney, Australia.
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Mary Coe and her husband Pete Thompson showed *Indexer* production editor Susan Curran Sydney's Northern Beaches area when she visited in December 2011

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