

**UCLA**

**InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies**

**Title**

Review: Indexing It All: The Subject in the Age of Documentation, Information, and Data, by Ronald E. Day

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80m1s60f>

**Journal**

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 12(1)

**ISSN**

1548-3320

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**Publication Date**

2016

Day, Ronald E. *Indexing It All: The Subject in the Age of Documentation, Information, and Data*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014. 170 pp. ISBN 978-0-262-02821-9

Reviews of Ronald Day's latest book, *Indexing It All*, face a double bind stemming from the book's critique of prevailing approaches to questions of "aboutness." Like the various "indexes" that Day focuses his discussion on---book classification systems, citation indexes, web page and database indexes (and their ancillary algorithmic support)---book reviews are also "modes of social positioning" that constitute the "informativeness" of documents (p. 2). To adapt one of Day's examples: a good review, like a good back-of-the-book index, points out key terms not only to make their meaning accessible but also to position the book within a broader discursive field. There's no harm in that it would seem, except that book reviews---documents often treated as more consumable substitutes for books---"are products of a political economy of rapid technologies and limited time and attention" that Day vehemently, almost irately, opposes (p. 148). The reviewer of *Indexing It All* does not sit at a comfortable distance from the book; they are quite close to its cross hairs.

The gist of Day's argument (I hesitate to state it) is that the political economy of the "modern documentary tradition"---"the twentieth- and early twenty-first century tradition of documentation, information, and data and their sciences" (p.2)---has gradually expanded its reach and the scope of its application, to the extent that it now structures not only people's relationships to informational materials (documents and data), but also people's relationships to one another and to themselves. "Political economy" should be understood as the logic of utility that encourages the reproduction of specific "sociocultural norms and forms" (p. 42). In Day's characterization, the intensification of the modern documentary tradition has coincided with the thinning of human experience as every aspect of life is recast as the mere production and manipulation of documents (recently data). This shift is motivated by the desire to increase the informativeness and relevance of documents and people to one another.

The good intention of writing an *informative* review turns sour in the face of Day's critique. Even if we don't agree with his argument, *Indexing It All* compels us to think critically about the "sociocultural norms and forms" of information practices and scholarly production, in particular. Rather than present a chapter-by-chapter synopsis, perhaps it is more appropriate to demonstrate the book's contribution by applying its critical framework to the present situation---to the practice of reviewing scholarly books.

As the rubric given to potential *InterActions* contributors suggests, a good review "assists members of the scholarly community in making informed decisions about which books are relevant to their research, which books to read

carefully, which to skim, and which to bypass altogether." Statements such as this one exemplify a contemporary understanding of the utility of documents in which people are cast as "users" with "information needs" and documents are conceptualized as materials that potentially satisfy those needs. Information retrieval systems and other "modes of social positioning" are meant to correctly bring together users and the documents that are relevant to their needs. Day locates the origin of this perspective in the work of Paul Otlet, the early twentieth-century founder of the European documentation movement (a precursor to modern information science) who sought classification systems to facilitate the efficient retrieval and use of documents.

Day demonstrates the epistemic distinctiveness of Otlet's "sociotechnical instrumentalism" by relating it to Heidegger's hermeneutics. In his comparison of statements from Otlet and Heidegger, Day focuses on Otlet's description of books as friends and the different notions of friendship in the two figures' work. For Otlet, a friend is an "other" that functions "as a source of information for the subject's needs" (p.22). In Heidegger's ontology, friendship---"a foundational relationship of community within which discourses and understanding may exist"---precedes informational needs, as the latter requires the "affordances of an already shared language" to be articulated (Pg. 22). Not surprisingly, with respect to this divergence, Day sides with Heidegger: a refrain throughout the book is that information needs are not just resolved by information systems and practices; they are also produced by those systems and practices. The production of new kinds of need is one link through which the political economy of the modern documentary tradition expands to enfold individuals' experiences and attitudes. Applying this idea to the present situation: the appealing utility of book reviews, and the fact that they *can* function to a certain extent as substitutes for books, accommodates and also helps guarantee the continued existence of academic professionals who are overworked and efficiency-minded.

In addition to being documents to be read (or skimmed), book reviews are also sources of data---data that can be aggregated, analyzed, and treated as information about a host of people and things (e.g., Ron Day, his book, me, the journal *InterActions*, etc). This aspect is increasingly important, even eclipsing the textual function; the essential action in the life of an academic publication (and the academic) is not being read, it is being linked, cited, tweeted, indexed, or listed in the relevant CVs. One factor motivating the publication of book reviews, for example, is that they bolster a journal's "impact factor"---a quantitative metric based on citation analysis that is often interpreted as a measure of influence and reputation.(A journal's impact factor is the number of citations to articles in the journal divided by the number of published *citable* articles in the journal, within a given window of time. Because book reviews can be cited but are not counted as "citable articles," citations to books review count more than citations to normal

research articles. Further, publishing a book review can't reduce the impact factor as the publication of a research article can, if it is never cited.)

Citation indexing and analysis techniques like impact factor play an important role in *Indexing It All* as precursors to contemporary "social computing"---a term Day uses to refer to social media and, more generally, to information systems that recursively combine social patterns of production and past user behavior in order to "prompt or otherwise offer documentary choices to the subject `anew'" (p. 60). The value of citation analysis is based on the assumption that citation networks map the structure of influence and the flow of concepts within scholarly communities. Similarly, social computing hinges on the interpretation of forms and patterns of digital production as indicators of sociocultural parameters such as taste and relevance (e.g., the link analysis of search engine algorithms, recommendation systems based on purchase histories, etc.). In its everyday use, this interpretive logic acquires a normative, even ontological weight---social computing comes to constitute the subjects and objects that it supposedly measures, as when scholarly journals work to maximize their impact factor score. What we gain in the Faustian bargain with social computing is a seductive logic for mapping social norms to technical "solutions"; what we give up is the experience and the sense of value that motivated those norms to begin with.

The failures of the modern documentary tradition are not readily apparent to those of us who have been inculcated by the revolutionary rhetoric of information technology. Thus, as a work of critical theory, the book's chief contribution is the vantage it provides from which the failures of information practices are more readily apparent---a perspective I have tried to adopt in my discussion of book reviews. Further, the only redress that Day offers comes in his championing of critique as a method for pushing back against the prevailing logic of social positioning. Critique, he writes, "is an event that attempts to alter social and personal indexes and how they are composed, accounted for, and valued" (p. 152). While there is an aspect of Day's argument that might come across as a romantic's call for a return to an authentic way of life (when people really read books!), a more charitable reading of *Indexing It All* recognizes it as a much needed humanistic reorientation of the modern documentary tradition.