

## Comparative Classification for Administrators: A Short Sermon

*It appears that in too many instances the administrators who must decide what classification schemes libraries should use lack understanding of comparative classification. As a result, these decisions are frequently based upon irrelevant considerations. The author points to the several weighty reasons for claiming that such systems as Bliss, the Colon Scheme, and the UDC are superior to those in common use in the United States today, and invites reconsideration of their merits.*

AMERICAN LIBRARIES are growing more rapidly than was expected; perhaps even more rapidly than the libraries around the world. Among libraries that are not growing in absolute size, there is a more rapid rate of inclusion and exclusion, thus requiring an even faster means of making use of the material held there for so short a time.

Librarians managing such pressurized institutions are aware of increasing needs for rapid and efficient access to their monumental and/or rapidly changing collections. There can be no sympathy for processing departments and their traditional (but growing) backlogs: the material must get out on the shelves and into the catalogs so it can be used! From all these pressures have come the movement toward automation, the use of simple computer-produced catalogs such as KWIC, size-storage, and centralized cataloging and classification.

Such devices have their uses, when their limitations are understood. And their usefulness can be increased if ways

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can be found to overstep these limitations while retaining the speed-advantage of each basic technique. This paper (and two longer ones<sup>1</sup> upon which it is based) is primarily concerned with the devices of automation and centralization. It is the headlong rush to reclassification with LC, as a supposedly invariable corollary of acceptance of centralized Library of Congress cataloging, that represents to many the great danger today, particularly to libraries also in process of automation. What is needed, as preliminaries to that decision (or to alternatives to it), is the development of a body of insights into *comparative classification*.

Such a title may suggest an austere and erudite discipline, and one cannot deny that, in its most developed forms, it is such. But it can perhaps be shown in a few fairly easy examples how it can be utilized, and what sort of conclusions can be drawn from it.

The two longer papers aforementioned have been concerned to develop, as

<sup>1</sup>"On Bibliography and Automation; or, How to Reinvent the Catalog" (*Libri*, XV (No. 4 1965), 287-339); and "Re-Classification: Some Warnings and a Proposal" (Illinois. University. Graduate School of Library Science. *Occasional Papers*, no. 87—in press).

the over-archingly guiding principle of all library service—whether conventional or automated, public or university/research, in a single institution or in a network, in public service *per se* or in “non-public” service such as acquisitions searching—the principle of *search strategy*, which can best (or most economically) be phrased “What, then, next?”—that is, what steps can be taken after the failure of the first attempt to provide that which will meet the patron’s need.

These two key concepts, comparative classification and search strategy, are not often found among the armory of administrators, to whom falls the decision which can be based only upon them; administrators have their own species of reasons, which need not be recited here, all presupposing a state of “everything else being equal. . . .” Comparative classification and the need for a search strategy together, though, can eliminate that only apparent state, and thus leave the administrator faced with issues other than “purely” administrative ones. Indeed, for administrators to have so long allowed themselves to be so little aware of the developing theory of library service as search strategy, even in such diverse thinkers as Metcalfe and Ranganathan, bespeaks a need for a new invigoration of the profession—probably possible only through the library schools.

Why do we sometimes become biased against a particular classification? If we have only one document on twentieth-century Magyar lyrical poetry, and it is all we have on Magyar literature we may well rebel at Dewey, 17th edition, which yields a code like 894.51110409003. If the document just prior is coded 894.3 (Turkic literature), and that just posterior is 894.6 (Paleosiberian literature), we may well say that the middle number is over-developed, and unnecessarily so. Yet in our subject headings, where adjacent entries are not necessarily conceptually

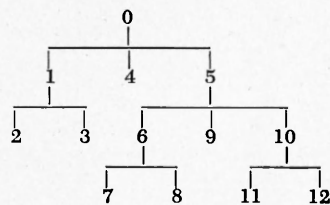
related, we do not object to one entry with a couple of subdivisions coming between two unsubdivided entries, alphabetically prior and posterior.<sup>2</sup> Nor, in a classification where the notation is non-structural and does not attempt to represent lower classificatory orders by extensions of the code, but simply numbers each node in the tree consecutively,<sup>3</sup> would it be resented if a document bearing a simple code for a *complex* idea were preceded and succeeded by documents bearing simple codes for *simple* ideas?

DC is under serious attack, especially the 17th edition, and for serious reasons. Yet these reasons are not truly fundamental; nor are they leading toward solutions which are fundamentally ameliorative of a sticky situation. Since the first need in library service is for search strategy (an answer to “What, then, next?”), a structure must be provided to help patrons and reference personnel discover the next most relevant documents. The two major types of such structure are *synthesis* (characteristic of subject headings) and *juxtaposition* (characteristic of notational classification).

Synthesis, and subject headings along with it, might be perfectable, but surely a great effort would be required, and the present structure would need to be replaced at one blow by its successor. It seems better then to recommend a shift to a wholly new mode of search strategy, than to be dominated by juxtaposition: in a word, the classified catalog.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, as chosen from Sears: ‘Hungary’/‘Hungary—History—Revolution, 1956—Addresses and essays—Bibliography’/‘Hunting.’

<sup>3</sup> E.g.



What is classification? Most American librarians can think only of shelf arrangement as the answer, but this is far from all. And the resistance to classification as search strategy is based on dissatisfaction with currently available "models," primarily DC and LC. Thus by a strange dialectic the majority of American library administrators have come to distrust all classification and to place their whole search-strategic trust in subject-headings—which, however, are neither perfect for conventional libraries nor even remotely sensible for automated searching.

Why is classification as search strategy resisted? What is one to think of a system that arranges but does not reveal its mode of arrangement?<sup>4</sup> What of a system where the same concept can be predicted to be in a large number of different places, depending on relatively minor connotational differences as interpreted by catalogers? What of a system which gives only one available search-strategic pathway, even from an initial point of attack that is complex,<sup>5</sup> and thus must require several such pathways?

What we do with such a system is to cease to expect such a function from it; we call it a "shelf arrangement," and thus effectively cease to need to think about it seriously.

But classification so characterized is not much of a representative of the family; where shall we find a better? In fact, several better ones are available: BC (Bliss' Bibliographic Classification), CC (Ranganathan's Colon Classification),

<sup>4</sup>It is generally assumed that this objection cannot touch alphabetically arranged catalogs; but I will show in a subsequent work (*The Idea of Order: an Essay in Bibliographical Systematics*) that this is not a really nonproblematical area at all.

<sup>5</sup>In our earlier example, the next most relevant document is not necessarily that on twentieth century Magyar poetry in general, since we may have no such; it may instead be twentieth century Finno-Ugrian lyric poetry, but what do we have available in the given code to allow an economical and rapid transfer of our attention thence?

and UDC (the Universal Decimal Classification) would all do what is needed. A few reasons are given in the aforementioned paper on "Re-Classification" for possible option for the last of these—primarily in terms of its strong family resemblance to DC, and hence its greater familiarity—but they will not be repeated here at any length. The one thing to be absolutely clear about, however, is that the above-mentioned defects of DC and LC are not characteristic of UDC. It is nearly ideal as a search strategy<sup>6</sup> in that it orders concepts hierarchically (but only after having separated out the elements of complex ones), its notation is structural (so that it can be ritually manipulated) and general-categoric (following, that is, the separation of the elements of complex concepts). In other words, with it you do know what to try next, the first point of attack having proved unsuccessful; and you know so *from the code itself, not from your grasp of its semantic contents*. In the cited example, "twentieth-century Magyar lyrical poetry," the UDC code 894.511-14"19" uses a sub-code for "lyrical poetry" that is uniform in all uses under class 8 (literature); thus if the best available document is on "twentieth-century Finno-Ugrian lyrical poetry" the code is still recognizably relevant: 894.5-14"19." Similarly with "twentieth-century Magyar poetry [of all types]": 894.511-1"19," or "Magyar lyrical poetry [of all periods]": 894.511-14; or, varying more than one facet at a time, 894.5-1"19"; or, adding in additional facets, 894.511-2-14"19" (-2 means "drama"); or, both adding in and

<sup>6</sup>I cannot claim, in fairness, that any available general classification of subject-heading system is really *perfect*; all that it is fair to do is to make a comparison in which we choose the best of the candidates in terms of the criteria recognized. It has been suggested that a thoroughly presuppositionless attempt to establish goals and criteria of performance would be advisable, and I must admit to a certain sympathy for such an undertaking; but there is a more immediate need, for which more immediate solutions are required.

varying, 894.5-2-14"15/19." In each such code, simple program recognition would indicate the degree of distance of the examined document-surrogate from the initial search-specification. What more do we expect from a classification, whether it be for shelf-arrangement, as the basis for a classified catalog, or as the basis for electronic searching?

LC cannot do any of these things for us; it has, as mentioned, probably been a large factor in the general disaffection with classification in the minds of American librarians and documentalists. Why then change to it? Why indeed!

For the sake of monetary advantage, that's why! What other service offers us as large a proportion<sup>7</sup> of classificatory work ready-done? None. What other service offers us descriptive cataloging along with this ready-made shelflist and shelf arrangement information? What other offers us a catalog-arranging and search-strategic device in addition to these other advantages? None!

But what good are these advantages in light of what we want to accomplish? None, if we can see significance differences between available classifications, some better and some worse (in terms of purpose and its achievement); a great deal, it would seem, if we cannot see such differences, since in that case we should look for a way to save money for purposes which *can* be effected by excellence.

This paper argues that there are such significant differences, and that our primary purpose is the provision of documentary relevances; hence we must choose the means for the achievement of this purpose, doing as well as we can within the financial constraints that such a choice imposes. And library administrators must do so too; they must be,

in the fullest sense, librarians. This does not just mean possessors of library degrees, but rather persons oriented to the true purpose of libraries. As administrators in the narrow sense they may need to take refuge with the wise counsel of their technical personnel, but they must not rest content if these are unable to outline to them the relations between input and output, cataloging (and classification) and reference, information storage and information retrieval. If they cannot find reference librarians who know the details of classification theory nor catalogers who know the details and needs of reference work, they must become librarians on their own and find out for themselves.

The *classified catalog*, then, arranged by UDC, is in the thinking of some people a far better solution than would be reclassification to LC, which does not really attack the central problem at all. But even if none can be persuaded to adopt the classified catalog, a search strategy such as UDC can be extremely helpful in *the search of electronically stored catalogs* which are the by-products of library automation. Only, however, if libraries either do their own tape-stored cataloging by UDC (which many would feel is not such a terrible problem), or if they can get such information externally (and centrally) ready-made. Therefore, a widespread agitation appears warranted that such a centralization of service comes about by the establishment (at the Library of Congress perhaps, or cooperatively by the Library of Congress and the British National Bibliography) of an agency to do what is now being done in terms of LC and DC codes—the assignment of UDC codes to a large proportion of the monographic literature. Indeed, this could be made an even more helpful project if such companies as Bowker and Wilson were to index by UDC, so that the card-

<sup>7</sup> Even though small enough for a really large and/or rapidly growing library. Also see P. A. Richmond, "Switch Without Deliberation," *Library Journal*, XCI (October 15, 1966), 4870.

or page-catalog, as well as external bibliographies contributing to the same searches, were to utilize the same rather than a pointless variety of strategies. The shelves, then, could continue to be arranged by DC or by partial UDC

codes, or even by LC (though the essential browsing function would be lost thereby).

The Library of Congress has always said that its classification was a private system; let's let them have it back. ■■

