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File Under ‘Et Cetera’: Non-Standard Library Classification Systems

Introduction

A Classification system is an indispensable tool for effective library management. Classification systems offer a logical approach to the organization of library materials. Yet classification is simply more than “finding the right notation or category; it is about relationships” (Young and Joudrey). In fact, classification systems have long been synonymous with libraries and librarianship. And without a formal means to classify, organize, or group collections, both patrons and staff would not be able to retrieve library materials quickly and effortlessly. Furthermore, having materials categorized by topic/subject makes the already onerous task of shelving more manageable and orderly for the day-to-day operation of these most cherished repositories of accessible information – our libraries.

In North America, though, libraries traditionally use one of two classification systems within their structures - the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) or Library of Congress (LCC). It is common knowledge within information organizations, that about 95% (Lynch and Mulero) of American public libraries still use DDC while academic libraries, specifically those with collections housing more than 500,000 materials (Rio), use LCC. Both classification systems have their own affordances and shortcomings, and without resorting to polemics, neither is superior despite the occasional strong opinions of a few librarians. Whether academic or public, possessing

a small or expansive collection, a library ought to be able to choose which classification system speaks to the specific needs of their clients and employees.

However, not all countries use the DDC and LCC classification systems within their libraries and organizations. For example, many European countries use the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) system, which is a derivation of the DDC except with newer sub-divisions and added hierarchical notations. In India, the Colon Classification (CC) is still essential to many academic and public institutions since S. R. Ranganathan first introduced this faceted system in 1933. The national library classification scheme of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Chinese Library Classification (CCL), boasts "43,600 categories" alone, and publishers also use this system to classify all books printed in China (Zhang). In summary – whether DDC, LCC, or the CCL in the PRC, libraries, worldwide, cannot properly sustain the operational wherewithal of everyday work expectations without an established classification system.

Still, whether for individual, financial, or social justice reasons some libraries have made a concerted effort to transition away from more ubiquitous and dominant classification systems. These libraries, instead, willingly choose classification schemes for reasons of simplicity or merely to effect change by leveraging personal interests in favour of their patronage. As such, the function of this essay is to, not only, highlight these atypically nuanced, alternative, library classification systems but provide insight into how these specialized systems work to challenge the status quo by abandoning the DDC and LCC – both, more recently, recognized for being "inherently racist" (Franzen).

Nevertheless, for those organizations who do not have the resources or time (sadly, two relatively common issues plaguing modern libraries) to design a new cataloguing system, non-standardized library classification systems do exist. Libraries should know that they exist in

exceedingly rare quantities, though. Yet, several smaller libraries do function, successfully at that, without ever using the customary classification systems of Dewey or the Library of Congress. Of pointed relevance to the thesis of this essay, are the independent and disparate systems created or adopted by the University of British Columbia's Xwi7xwa Library, The Brautigan Library, and the Markham Public Library. By examining how these three specific libraries operate outside the aegis of a conventional classification system, the benefits of embracing an alternate classification system becomes apparent through the emphasis of progressive, balanced standards at the expense of regressive, biased systems.

The Xwi7xwa Library: An Alter-Native Classification System and Approach

The University of British Columbia's Xwi7xwa Library places emphasis on the underrepresented scholarship of the Indigenous community. The Xwi7xwa Library derives its name from the Squamish language word(s) meaning 'copy' or 'echo' ("About"). Its mandate, just as its etymological roots suggest, is to *echo* the interests, contributions, and voices of the Indigenous peoples regarded by catalogers in a manner long considered "inappropriate, misguided, and discriminatory" (Cherry and Mukunda 549). Opening in 1993 and boasting over 12,000 items, the Xwi7xwa Library houses a special collection of Indigenous materials including journals, maps, dissertations as well as archival materials ("Collections"). As the sole Indigenous branch of an academic library in Canada, the Xwi7xwa Library applied its own locally proven 'Ways of Knowing' and First Nations House of Learning's (FNHL) subject headings ("Xwi7xwa Library"). By adopting their own classification system, in the form of a modified Brian Deer Classification system, Xwi7xwa challenges colonial knowledge systems, and biases, as typically crystallized through the lenses of the DDC and LCC.

The Brian Deer Classification (BDC) system, as well as the British Columbia variant created by Xwi7xwa's founding librarian Gene Joseph, became the first recognized framework to reflect the worldview of Indigenous communities, specifically, through the importance of building relationships “between people, animals, and land” (Weihs 12). The function of the BDC is not only to “reflect the concerns of local Indigenous people” (12) but to “keep it simple” (Cherry and Mukunda 553). The LCC-modified call numbers “are as short and succinct as possible while providing adequate organization and delineation” (553). Due to its limited scope, the Brian Deer Classification system is far from perfect. However, as utilized by the Xwi7xwa Library, the BDC goes a long way to make “the invisible visible” (Doyle 123) by Indigenizing coveted library spaces and collections.

Although not a traditional universal classification system, BDC does at least foster a more culturally and comprehensive approach that reflects the concerns of Canadian First Nations peoples and libraries. Further emblematic of the holistic engagement practiced at the Xwi7xwa, their librarians strive to form deeper relationships with their community by getting to know their patronage “on a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level” (Worth). By creating a safe and “welcoming learning experience” (Worth), librarians at the Xwi7xwa believe that building rapport with their patronage, including “asking about visitors’ families” (Worth), can go a long way in forming an accurate picture of the research needs of their visitors. Whereas Western-European classification systems prioritize the sorting, finding, and retrieval of materials in their collections, the Xwi7xwa Library and its staff understand that there is more to librarianship than the mere, almost ritualistic, act of organizing books on shelves. Simply, Xwi7xwa librarians prioritize their patrons over the organization of objects to “better reflect multiple constituencies now and then” (Bowker and Star 326)

The Brautigan Library: An Authorial-Centered Classification System

Based on a fantastical library from the 1971 novel *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966*, the real-world version of the Brautigan Library provides access to an eclectic collection of over four hundred manuscripts, literary artifacts, and special collections. Housed in Vancouver, Washington, the Brautigan collection, in its present iteration, draws inspiration while putting into practice Richard Brautigan's notion that a library, at least in terms of *The Abortion*, ought to "gather pleasantly together 'the unwanted, the lyrical and haunted volumes of American writing'" (96). In keeping with the whimsical essence of the Brautigan Library, the unpublished manuscripts are, therefore, further compartmentalized into one of the library's select fifteen categories via the Mayonnaise System - its name taken from the "last chapter [and word] of Brautigan's best-known novel, *Trout Fishing in America*" (Barber).

The Mayonnaise System emphasizes authorial satisfaction over any, and all, standard classification systems even at the expense of patron preferences. Other than making an initial choice about which category suits their manuscript (at one time demarcated by mayonnaise jars until the jars kept falling and breaking), authors are free to place their books wherever they desire thus providing "personal satisfaction, relief, or closure in submitting them" (Hyman). The demography of manuscript submitters might include "children submitting tales told in crayon about their toys; teenagers telling tales of angst and old people dropping by with their memoirs" ("The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966"). The Mayonnaise System, both real or otherwise, follows the precise mandate of the fictitious and unnamed librarian-cum-narrator's practice, in that, "[w]e don't use the Dewey decimal classification or any index system to keep track of our books... the author is free to place it anywhere he wants in the library, on whatever shelf catches his fancy" (Brautigan).

All manuscripts submitted to the Brautigan Library become classified according to the Mayonnaise System's cataloging methodology. Categories of the Mayonnaise System, in (mostly) alphabetical order, include Adventure (ADV), All the Rest (ALL), Family (FAM), Future (FUT), Humor (HUM), Love (LOV), Meaning of Life (MEA), Natural World (NAT), Poetry (POE), Social/Political/Cultural (SOC), Spirituality (SPI), Street Life (STR), War and Peace (WAR), Digital (DIG) added in 2013 for digital manuscripts and Special Collections (SPC). Evidently an allusion to *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, the Mayonnaise System includes an 'All the Rest', instead of a Borgesian 'Et Cetera' category for objects outside the catchment of the conceptual framework.

Cataloguing is, nevertheless, straightforward for the Mayonnaise System/Brautigan collection. Books become sorted first by categorical choice (determined arbitrarily by original submitter), then by year of submission, and finally by order of acquisition. For illustrative purposes, a sixth potential 2013 entry accepted into the collection, whose author wishes to have their manuscript sorted under 'Meaning of Life', will have their vetted work shelved under the call number: MEA 2013.006. Like an archive, once accessioned into the Brautigan Library, a record of provenance is generated containing the date of acquisition, author's name, librarian notes, as well as the order in which the manuscript became accepted. Despite the radical and ostensibly nonsensical taxonomy of the Mayonnaise System, its implementation in a traditional space such as the Brautigan Library tenders affordances through "new forms of publication scholarship, information organization and flexibility through browsability as well as findability" (Lekach).

Markham Public Library's C3: Dewey or Don't We

In 2007, a Markham Public Library (MPL) customer survey revealed that members found Dewey's system for the organizing of nonfiction materials using "long strings and numbers both

confusing and frustrating” (“Replacing Dewey” 19). Incentivized by the lackluster community response to traditional classification systems the MPL opted instead to establish their own end-user nonfiction classification system – the Customer-Centered Classification (C3). Before the end of the year, all eight branches of the MPL system implemented C3. Subsequent annual feedback indicated that customers marginally favoured C3 (96%) over Dewey (78%) when searching the nonfiction collection (31). Others believed that C3 was more conducive to browsing and made the nonfiction collection more aesthetically pleasing - like a bookstore. Markham community members were more than receptive to this nontraditional, almost prosaic, paradigmatic change. Even more telling the C3 reflects a pedestrian perspective because, as one patron plainly suggested, “the world doesn’t think like librarians do” (19).

As a corollary to increased customer satisfaction through the implementation of the C3 platform, operational efficiency improved dramatically across the entire MPL system. Governmentally funded public institutions, such as the MPL, are responsible for producing balanced budgets to appease its board members and stakeholders. Consequently, public libraries must constantly find whatever resources to keep branch doors open and shelves amply stocked. Less dramatic or consequential than laying-off staff or reducing one’s collection, the C3 saved the Markham Public Library time and (much needed) money through more efficient material handling while increasing collection turnover (“A Better Way to Browse” 2). Some of the measurable improvements include: a productivity increase of 346.7% when retrieving items (“Replacing Dewey” 37); a reduction in shelving times from 95 minutes (Dewey) to 20 minutes (C3) (38); and a 476.4% increase in savings when shelving materials (39). Initially the C3 system had its detractors. However, with its “simplicity, browsability, and specificity” (“A Better Way to Browse” 2), C3 made searching, shelving, and retrieval practices more manageable for staff and

patrons. Through implementation of the C3 system, the Markham Public Library saved taxpayers money by creating an “efficient and effective library operations by improving material flow while containing staff costs” (2) - a much welcome benefit in these times of widespread austerity.

Conclusion

Although limitations due to economies of scale, being too complex, or too onerous to retrain staff are but a few reasons why an unconventional classification system may suit the demands of one institution yet not another. However, we ought to at least acknowledge those libraries, public or otherwise, that openly elect to organize their collections outside the traditional standards of classification. For instance, some such as the Markham Public Library, develop their own classification system, the Customer-Centered Classification (C3), in the interest of building a non-fiction collection to meet the needs of their patrons. Secondary to the C3’s customer-friendly initiative, the MPL also benefited financially by patenting their “classification scheme used in conjunction with a database system” (Hosseini-Ara et al.).

Rather than focusing on publisher or patron interests, the Brautigan Library’s unusual Mayonnaise System prioritizes a counter-cultural, auteur-centered approach to categorizing its series of unpublished manuscripts. Presently, the Brautigan Library now accepts e-book submissions as part of their move to curate and create virtual space for digitally disparate writers. Despite its lack of publishing pedigree, the Brautigan Library is more than just a “literary junkyard, it is a positive, and yes, winsome, endeavor as it collects, preserves, and curates unpublished manuscripts and other literary artifacts, believing each has its own, unique story to share” (Barber). And the Brautigan Library accomplishes this by giving aspiring authors absolute authority on how to classify, and where to shelve their manuscripts in a collection known for its “private sadnesses and obsessions and daydreams and personal soapboxes of hundreds of people” (Burbank).

By implementing BDC, the Xwi7xwa Library draws fundamental attention to “place-based Indigenous scholarship” (“Xwi7xwa Library Brochure”) for First Nations peoples long underheard and marginalized in their own country. Noticeably absent from the DDC and LCC are topics of local interest and crisis such as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) which now have their own classification and subject headings (Szeto) in the Xwi7xwa Library. By providing an alternative classification theme the Xwi7xwa Library confronts traditional and biased knowledge organizations by privileging Indigenous, rather than colonial perspectives.

To be clear, this essay approaches the study of non-standard classification systems with, admittedly, fixed purpose and limited scope given the parameters of this assignment. The intention of this paper was never to granularly analyze the innerworkings of traditional classification systems or myopically resort to polemics about whether the Dewey Decimal, or the Library of Congress, classification system works best for public or academic libraries. This would be counterintuitive to the spirit of this topic and, more appropriately, the essence of those libraries who would rather invest more in their user experiences in lieu of their information systems. Instead, this essay deliberately highlights, and proffers a cursory introduction into three uniquely, almost quixotic, classification systems used in the Markham Public Library (C3), the Brautigan Library (Mayonnaise System) and the Xwi7xwa Library (Brian Dear Classification). Again, this is not an exhaustive list of library systems which openly challenge the status quo of organizational routines practiced within their branches. Other progressive libraries effectively perform acts of resistance, too, through community outreach and EDID-inspired collections. However, as stewards of knowledge, librarians ought to recognize, early in their career, that categorizing “is not a neutral act” (Yudkowsky) and, certainly, more alarmingly “classification does indeed have its consequences” (Bowker & Star 319).

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