Op Ed-The Subject Heading Browse Display: Another Essential Component of Information Discovery-A Response to Donald Hawkins on Indexing Data and Indices

Rebecca Kornegay
Western Carolina University, kornegay@wcu.edu

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Religion, Hunter Library, Western Carolina University; Phone: 828-227-3417) <kornegay@wcu.edu>

by Rebecca Kornegay (Research & Instruction Librarian, Associate Professor, Liaison to History, Philosophy, Religion, Hunter Library, Western Carolina University; Phone: 828-227-3417) <kornegay@wcu.edu>

I
Indexes are back! In the December 2012-January 2013 issue of Against the Grain (v.24#6, p.66-68), Donald Hawkins wrote an article most welcome, “Indexing and Indices: An Essential Component of Information Discovery.” He describes our industry’s recognition that high-quality indexing is important and reports on several publishers’ current work to create taxonomies and thesaurus that will improve their wares. And in Peter Meyers’ blog post, “Missing Entry: Whither the eBook Index?” Meyers gives the best explanation I’ve seen for why even eBooks need indexes. I was delighted to see these pieces, just as I was pleased to see the 2012 Charleston Conference talks give so much time to findability. This is a shift from a few years back, when content was the only game in town. It’s hard not to agree that content should be king; without it, where would we be? But while our digital content grew like topsy, libraries were mostly content creators — not contain the indexes that exist in the best e-reference sources out there) do not include indexes in their discovery catalogs, are choosing not to make this search tool available to front-of-the-house librarians. There are several situations, in fact, in which the subject browse feature is crucial.

Situation 1: Understanding the Large Collection

Consider two universities with large agricultural programs — North Carolina State University and Cornell University — and their collections about pigs, properly called “swine” in the agricultural context. Type “swine” into NCSU’s “Books & Media” search box and you get a list of almost 2,000 titles. Relevance is spot on, and a dropdown box offers several useful limiter suggestions, but still, we’re looking at 2,000 books about swine. When I’m on the spot as a reference librarian, I want a clear picture of a collection, and to get that I need the complete list of swine subject headings. At Cornell University’s library that’s just what I get, when I bypass the initial search box and slip, librarian-style, into the Classic Catalog. There I find an orderly list of the subject headings that describe Cornell’s very large collection of books about pigs. Granted it takes 459 subject headings to do it, but the headings make sense right away:

- Swine — Anatomy
- Swine — Behavior
- Swine — Breeding
- Swine — Economic aspects
- Swine — Feeding and feeds
- Swine — Housing
- Swine — Marketing

The University of Virginia’s libraries illustrate this equally well. A search on Thomas Jefferson in UVA’s discovery catalog yields over 8,000 items and offers straightforward a list of them all. The discovery catalog offers also an advanced search, where specifying a subject search winsnows the list to 4,700. But consider the added value of the subject heading browse display in UVA’s VIRGO Classic catalog, where readers who are interested in the stages of Jefferson’s life can choose from this list:

- Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826 — Childhood and youth
- Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826 — Family
- Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826 — Marriage
- Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826 — Last years
- Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826 — Death and burial

Situation 2: The Search for the Intangible

The subject heading browse display can also express nuance and suggest terminology for searches for which keywords are not obvious. Virginia’s Thomas Jefferson collection is, again, a perfect case study. The VIRGO Classic catalog offers the researcher a remarkable list of suggestions that help find books on the intangible as...
Searches?

Admit it, in many cases the searcher has a snowball's chance in hell of coming up with a term that will match the catalog’s records. This is clear when researchers seek works about a particular time period. The subject heading structure of chronological subdivisions is a work of scholarship, perfected by specialists at the Library of Congress, and it can quickly scuttle a keyword search. Each country’s history, for example, has its own set of time periods: Canada—History—1841-1887, but Uruguay—History—1830-1875. Topics other than history have chronological subdivisions, too. Chinese art subdivisions are based on dynasties (--Ming-Qing, --Song-Yuan) and geology uses --Jurassic or --Cambrian. In other words, guessing the right way to type a time period into a search box is next to impossible. Much better to ask for the complete list of possible time periods, presented in the subject heading browse display, and choose the best one for the question at hand.

Professional Expertise

It’s worth noting that savvy library users have noticed the value of the subject index that is embedded in library catalogs. Students and faculty often know to click on a subject heading link within a catalog record (though they’re frequently surprised to find themselves back where they started, with the one item they found in the first place). And discovery catalogs depend on the subject headings in order to recommend ways to limit a search. But for a reference librarian, hyperlinked subject headings and subject-based facets should complement the full subject heading browse display, not supplant it.

Researchers expect librarians to be search experts, to know techniques that go far beyond excellent keyword searching. In the Ithaka report, Supporting the changing research practices of historians, the interviewer asked historians, “Have you worked with any of the librarians on campus?” Historian: “Oh yes. Because they are trained as librarians they can think of search terms, or ways of searching that I — I am not trained as a librarian, so I don’t. So yes, definitely the librarians are crucial in the whole research process....” The reference librarian who doesn’t know about the subject heading browse display (or whose library has chosen to relegate it to the back of the house) is missing out one of our profession’s best-performing tools.

DDA, the bookBot, and Final Thoughts

In a 2005 LJ article and subsequent book, Magic Search: Getting the Best Results from Your Catalog and Beyond (ALA Editions, 2009), colleagues and I argued that keyword searching using subject heading terminology is an essential professional skill. We didn’t say much about using the display of subject heading + subdivision as a browse tool. But recent developments convince me that the browse function really does matter. Demand-driven acquisitions, remote storage of materials, and closed-stack set-ups like NC State University’s bookBot robotic book delivery system in the new Hunt Library mean that finding...
what you want in the catalog is often the only way to go.

A colleague said to me the other day, “they’ll never make indexes like they used to.” She is probably right. Full-text keyword searching is here to stay, and I wouldn’t have it otherwise. But the library catalog’s subject index is a tool we all own. It’s already designed, built, paid for. Library of Congress continues to modify it to suit emerging topics and trends.

So what’s a librarian to do? Reference librarians, make sure the subject heading browse display is available to you. Learn to use it. If you’ve never seen it, ask about it. And when a foundering freshman wails, “I just want to write about gun control, and my professor says I have to narrow the topic,” don’t start typing. Instead, perform librarian magic. Pull up the browse screen and read off a few choices: “How about public opinion, social aspects, or ownership?”

Catalogers? Keep up the good work and recognize how important it is that your work be understood by those outside of technical services.

All librarians, when you implement the best discovery catalog, beautifully designed with the user in mind, don’t abandon “essential components of information discovery” like the subject heading browse display. No, they’re not for the amateur. In fact, that’s the point!

References


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Speaking of Cambridge, with Anthony Watkinson, the wonderful (where does he get his energy? he travels all the time), visited with the energeter bunny Julie Carroll-Davis (Vice President, Global Content Alliances, ProQuest — I had always wondered where the Quorum was and what it was, quite a group of offices and buildings), Serpil Pavey (her name is Turkish and means “to blossom” and she does indeed blossom as a meeting organizer extraordinaire) and the equally energetic Heather Crossan. We are planning for the 16th Fiesole Retreat, which will be in Cambridge at the DoubleTree by Hilton tentatively April 10-12, 2014. If you are interested, we can tell you more. www.casalini.it/retrait/

Speaking of which, Cambridge is a charming town, like Oxford but more rural. There’s the Fitzwilliam Museum with wonderful ancient artifacts and gorgeous mosaic floors that put wood to shame, tons of charming and walkable colleges, the most impressive of which is King’s College which was founded in 1441 by Henry VI (1421-71) and is one of the 31 colleges in the University of Cambridge. (Did you know that Anthony himself studied at Peterhouse?) Since I have a son in the Army, I was very interested in the Eagle Pub when our cab driver told us about it. Since it was on flat land, Cambridge was where many RAF WWII missions originated. Of course the Eagle fed and watered many pilot types. There is a ceiling in a back room that is decorated with mementos from the pilots and also a plaque to them in the pub.

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