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

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Op Ed — The Subject Heading Browse Display: Another Essential Component of Information Discovery

A Response to Donald Hawkins on Indexing and Indices

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>

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 thesauri 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 left with what Hawkins terms “brute force searching” to dig into mammoth full-text databases.

This push for solid indexing isn’t universal, though. While JSTOR is working on its JSTOR Thesaurus, and ProQuest devotes a department to vocabulary management, other information providers take a different route. Electronic reference works in Credo and Oxford Reference Online (two of the very best e-reference sources out there) do not contain the indexes that exist in the print volumes, and JSTOR’s eBooks, as demoed at the Charleston Conference, anyway, offer no navigation from an eBook’s index to the pages inside. Kudos, by the way, to Gale Virtual Reference, which does include indexes and links the searcher from the index entry into the reference book itself.

The appearance of Hawkins’ article in ATG gives me a jumping-off place to talk about another sort of index, one that, were it a winged creature, would appear on the threatened species list. That is the library catalog’s subject index, and more specifically, its public manifestation as the subject heading browse display. I’m talking about the traditional, pre-coordinated subject heading, made up of main subject heading plus subdivisions, presented early on in a search. For example, a subject heading browse screen for books about the Vietnam War might look like this:

Vietnam War, 1961-1975—Aerial operations
Vietnam War, 1961-1975—Economic aspects
Vietnam War, 1961-1975—Foreign public opinion
Vietnam War, 1961-1975—Medical care
Vietnam War, 1961-1975—Personal narratives

Why should we care about this? Two reasons: The subject heading browse display provides a unique and powerful way of getting into our collections; at the same time, many libraries, when they implement 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 winnows 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 aspects of Jefferson’s life — childhood, youth, family, marriage, last years, death and burial. The subject heading browse display can also express nuance and suggest terminology for searches for which keywords are not obvious.

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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—1841-1867, 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 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 founding 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


