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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

