EDITORIAL

Universal Classification

The present issue contains three contributions devoted to the problems of universal classification. The first one (by P. N. Kaula) is concerned with theoretical aspects of the Colon Classification, which aspects, however, are also of a general classificatory interest; the second one (by J. M. Perreault) deals with the manual for classing with the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), and the third one (by J. McKinlay) gives a survey report on the classification systems used in Australia, indicating among other things that most libraries there use the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC). His concluding statements should give us pause;

> "Theorists have been telling us for many years that the large general classification schemes, such as DDC or LCC, will decline and disappear in the age of machine-based information retrieval systems. There is absolutely no evidence that this is happening . . ."

The universal classification systems of long-standing use may be likened to the roads in our countries, which must continue to exist because men must be able to move from one place to another. And as long as mankind does not stop producing books and other documents, the existing CS must likewise be used, often in need of updating and correction though they may be.

But when traffic becomes denser and denser, the narrow and outworn roads of the past no longer suffice. They must be totally rebuilt and be supplemented or even replaced by a network of broad, modern highways.

Why does not even one institution in the world seem to be receptive to the idea of replacing, by the same token, the universal classification systems of the past century by new ones capable of meeting modern requirements?

Is it perhaps because we ourselves do not yet see clear as to what we should propose as an alternative, optimal form of a classification system (CS) geared to the needs of the future?

Many of us believe that a CS will of necessity be outdated after 30 years of use, and that it would cost too much effort then to construct a new system. Therefore, it is argued, one should stick to the existing system and adapt it – as far as its flexibility permits – to the changes that have meanwhile taken place.

Our Indian friends have devoted a great deal of thought to these problems of late, for the 6th edition of the Colon Classification, reprinted most recently in 1964, has long been in need of a revision. If no such revision should be forthcoming, one must look for another system.

The Deutsche Bibliothek (DB = German National Library) currently is faced with the problem of deciding whether or not to use the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) as the vehicle for the groupings in its announcement journal "Wöchentliches Verzeichnis" (Weekly List). To facilitate its own decision the Library has mailed a questionnaire to its users calling for a choice between two alternative group formation procedures: one based on the UDC, the other on the experiences which the DB itself has gathered in grouping the literature in the different subject fields during the past 30 years. The latter looks, so much more balanced and reasonable that the outcome of the choice is not difficult to guess. This decision, however, would militate against classification as such, since the advantages of using an existing system lie in the possibility of adequately classifying vaster amounts of bibliographical data as well, e.g. where it is not merely a case of weekly, but of monthly, 6-monthly, annual or multi-annual cumulations.

When we started this journal in 1974 we imagined that the years to come would see rapid progress in the theory of classification science, so that the principles for the structuring of a modern universal classification system would soon become apparent for everybody.

FID/CR plans a 4th International Study Conference for 1982 on the topic "Subject Analysis and Ordering Systems" (a Call for Papers will be published soon). This conference would be a suitable occasion for presenting proposals on how to design an up-to-date, universal classification system, incorporating especially all the structural aspects of such a comprehensive system. After all, haven't we drawn our lessons from the classification systems existing right now? All those characteristics of these systems which have proven their worth in the practice should of course be retained. But in any event these features should first of all be rounded up and, where applicable, be weighed against one another. Each one of the six most used universal classifications existing has positive aspects as well as negative ones. Would it be utopian to try to isolate and present these positive aspects? Would it be utopian, on the basis of these positive aspects of the existing systems to try to design and develop a new one which one day be used by all and to which all may change over? Would it be utopian to strive for all a new universal system, fit for being used in the 21st century as well?

It would certainly be most useful if all interested persons would already now give thought to the question of how they would structure such a universal system, according to what rules (facet formulae, concept combinations?) the classes of such a system should be formed and what the organizational part of such an undertaking should look like.

I am convinced that the human race, capable as it is of engaging in the most unbelievable enterprises e.g. in space, is equally capable of presenting the concepts it works with in such a well-organized way as is consistent with the present state of knowledge. But this presupposes a strong determination to do exactly this. If we can command this determination we will also find the means for accomplishing our purpose.

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