

# Reviews of Concepts in Knowledge Organization

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## BISAC: Book Industry Standards and Communications<sup>†‡</sup>

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**Abstract:** The BISAC Subject Headings List is a standard used to categorize books in the book industry of the United States. Since the second half of the 2000s, several public libraries in the United States have experimented with BISAC as an alternative classification system to the *Dewey Decimal Classification* (DDC). The system has been used by Google Books and other electronic platforms. This article reviews its main characteristics, structure and display, development and revision process, epistemology and approach to KO, use in libraries, and future.

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### 1.0 Introduction

The BISAC Subject Headings List, also known as the BISAC Subject Codes List, is a standard used to categorize books based on topical content in the book industry of the United States. BISAC stands for Book Industry Standards and Communications and is maintained and developed in the United States by the Book Industry Study Group (BISG). BISAC is used to standardize the electronic transfer of subject information between trading partners, as search terms in bibliographic databases, as access points for database searching, and as shelving guides. BISAC has been used to a certain degree by

Google Books and other ebook platforms for categorization. Many major businesses require publishers to provide a pre-categorization with BISAC when submitting data throughout the book supply chain (BISG 2016a). As a consequence, several public libraries in the United States have experimented with BISAC as an alternative classification system to the *Dewey Decimal Classification* (DDC), having the possibility of having books pre-categorized by the publishers and thus avoiding in-house classification. These experiments gained major attention by the media in 2007 when Perry Branch Library in Maricopa County (Arizona) was presented as the first case of Dewey-BISAC switching in the United States, which inspired and

opened the possibility of using this bookstore system in libraries. After this case, several other libraries in the United States and abroad looked to Maricopa as a source of inspiration for the remodeling and new opening projects of their systems, considering BISAC and other bookstore-like techniques as a good alternative to traditional practices in knowledge organization such as the *DDC*.

One of the biggest assets of BISAC is said to be that the scheme is available online at no cost for one-to-one look-ups. However, those organizations that want to download versions of the subject headings list in Excel, PDF, and Word, in order to incorporate the scheme into their internal systems, need to purchase a database access license that also includes BIC-to-BISAC, BISAC-to-Thema and JUV/JNF to YA/YAF mappings. The end-user license is free only for the BISG members. The “End-user License of BISAC Subject Headings, 2015 Edition” (the latest version of the scheme at the time of this writing), ranged from US\$1,195.00, for non-BISG members in the largest organizations (of more than 50 million dollars), to US\$295.00 for non-BISG members in the smallest organizations (under 1 million dollars) (BISG 2016b), while the flat fee for libraries to become a BISG member, and thus have access to the license, is US\$625.00 (BISG 2016c).

## 2.0 Versions and numbering of BISAC

The origins of BISAC date back to the 1990s. As a norm, BISAC is released in an annual basis at the end of every year including updates, deactivated codes and changes from the previous edition, making necessary for any institution wanting to use an up-to-date version of the scheme within the system the payment of the fee every year. In 2006, the naming convention for BISAC was changed in 2006 from a numbered version (i.e., Version X.X) to a dated edition (i.e., CCYYY Edition). Table 1 shows the dates and version identification of the different editions of BISAC according to BISG sources (Bole et al. 2009; Harbison 2015) and other media.

## 3.0 Classification system or subject headings?

The denomination of BISAC as a classification system or as subject headings has been used indistinctly by the BISG depending on the context. On one hand, the system is usually called “BISAC Subject Headings” when introduced by BISG representatives (e.g., Bole et al. 2009; Harbison 2015). In addition, the scheme is called a “Subject Headings List” in the BISG website, and the “FAQ” section recommends assigning from one to three headings depending on the complexity of the title (thus it is considered subject headings again). On the other hand,

BISAC is also sometimes called a classification system by BISG representatives (or a “subject classification system for books,” as Julie Morris called it at ALA 2014) and is listed on the BISG website as a classification scheme together with “BISAC Merchandising Themes” and “BISAC Regional Themes” (“BISG develops and maintains a number of classification systems for both physical and digital products. The systems can be used individually or together to help determine where the work is shelved in a bricks-and-mortar store or the genre(s) under which it can be searched for in an online database.” BISG 2016d). Concerning authors and institutions other than the BISG, OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), which has mapped BISAC to the *DDC*, in addition to mappings to other subject headings such as the *LCSH* (*Library of Congress Subject Headings*) and the *MeSH* (*Medical Subject Headings*), considers BISAC a subject headings list (“WebDewey 2.0 where you can ... search or browse DDC numbers, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), Mapped MeSH and BISAC headings.” OCLC 2016), perhaps with the intention of presenting it as a complement to the *DDC* and not as a substitute. However, the reality is that those libraries adopting BISAC in the United States were dropping the *DDC* and using the bookstore scheme as a classification system for the physical classification and arrangement of books. In the light of this, several studies

BISAC edition	Date of implementation (when available)	Date of release (when available)
BISAC 1.0	1995	
BISAC 2.0	November 1997	
BISAC 2.1	May 1999	
BISAC 2.2	January 2000	
BISAC 2.3	May 2000	
BISAC 2.4	January 2001	
BISAC 2.5	July 2001	
BISAC 2.6	May 2002	
BISAC 2.7	June 2003	
BISAC 2.8	March 2004	
BISAC 2.9	May 2005	
BISAC 2006	September 2006	
BISAC 2007	September 2007	
BISAC 2008	November 2008	
BISAC 2009	September 2009	November 2009
BISAC 2010	September 2010	November 2010
BISAC 2011	September 2011	
BISAC 2012	September 2012	November 29th, 2012
BISAC 2013	October 2013	December 15th, 2013
BISAC 2014	September 2014	November 11 <sup>th</sup> , 2014
BISAC 2015		December, 2015

Table 1. Dates of implementation and release of the different editions of BISAC.

have treated BISAC as a new case of reader—interest classification (Martínez-Ávila and San Segundo 2013; Martínez-Ávila et al. 2014).

#### 4.0 Structure and display of BISAC

BISAC is an “industry-approved” list of subject literal descriptors, each of them linked to a nine-character alphanumeric code. An example of a literal descriptor plus the alphanumeric code would be “MAT012040 MATHEMATICS / Geometry / Non-Euclidean.” Literal descriptors consist, by definition, of two, three or, occasionally, four parts with semantic meaning. This means that the system has a maximum depth of 4 levels and no subject can reach a deeper level of specificity than that. Literal descriptors are intended for print/display purposes. Each part (or level) of the literal descriptor is separated by a forward slash (/). Literal descriptors of first level represent broad subjects while literal descriptors of subsequent levels represent aspects or facets of that subject. Nine-character alphanumeric codes are unique identifiers attached to the literal descriptors and are basically intended for Electronic Data Interchange (EDI). These codes begin with a three-character alpha part that is usually mnemonic for the literal main subject category in English (e.g., MAT for MATHEMATICS, COM for COMPUTERS, etc.) and is followed by a six-character numeric segment representing the specific subject within the category. The BISG notes that in Version 1 of the BISAC Subject Heading list, the codes had hierarchical meaning but this is no longer the case (BISG 2016a). BISAC subject descriptors are not arranged by code on the BISG website and the end-user license documents that include the system, but loosely alphabetically by literal and showing some hints of systematicity, such as always listing first the facet “General” in levels of order two, three, and four. An example of a class in BISAC showing some systematicity would be the beginning of “History:”

HIS000000 HISTORY / General  
HIS001000 HISTORY / Africa / General  
HIS001010 HISTORY / Africa / Central  
HIS001020 HISTORY / Africa / East  
HISTORY / Africa / Egypt see Middle East / Egypt  
or Ancient / Egypt  
HIS001030 HISTORY / Africa / North  
HIS001040 HISTORY / Africa / South / General

An example of lack of systematicity or even apparent logic in the sequence of codes would be the following one:

ART054000 ART / Annuals  
ART037000 ART / Art & Politics

ART019000 ART / Asian  
ART042000 ART / Australian & Oceanian  
ART055000 ART / Body Art & Tattooing  
ART043000 ART / Business Aspects  
ART015040 ART / Canadian

Due to this lack of systematic order, BISAC codes are not shown on the stacks, printed on the books, or displayed in the catalog (the nine-character alphanumeric codes are not intended to be used for arrangement or as call numbers). The BISG recognizes that one of the main reasons why the use of BISAC headings for the physical arrangement of books is not officially recommended is because sometimes publishers prefer to use their traditional systems for this purpose. However, an idealistic future in which BISAC headings are printed on books and in the catalogs was also envisioned by the BISG: “Printing the descriptors is a very good idea although not an official recommendation at this time due to the desire on the part of most publishers to continue use of their traditional merchandising syntax. An idealistic view of the future would have all publishers using the BISAC Subject Headings as the basis of their merchandising syntax and thus print them in catalogs and on books” (BISG 2013). Nonetheless, although publishers might prefer their own syntax, libraries that have moved to BISAC in the United States are using BISAC headings for the physical arrangement and display of books on the shelves while it is also true that the BISAC codes are not used or shown.

For the grouping of titles with dissimilar BISAC assignments, booksellers can also apply additional terms to the subject codes based on merchandising themes and topics (BISAC Merchandising Themes) and the regional setting or regional focus of the title (BISAC Regional Themes) (Harbison 2010).

#### 5.0 BISAC revision process, epistemology, and the concept of “market warrant”

According to the BISG website, “the Headings list is maintained by BISG’s Subject Codes Committee consisting of members of BISG interested in the intellectual challenge of creating, revising and amending an authority list of terms for *‘the industry’*” (BISG 2016a, emphasis added). By 2016, the BISG’s Subject Codes Committee was chaired by Connie Harbison of Baker & Taylor (BISG 2016e), a commercial distributor of books and entertainment based in the United States. According to Bole et al. (2009), this committee consists of volunteers from BISG member organizations including publishers, retailers, wholesalers, and data aggregators. The role of volunteers in setting the standard was highlighted again in 2010 by Bole and Harbison, and by Harbison in 2015, although,

as Sanford Thatcher noted, this volunteer work is strictly restricted to BISG members and its consequent fee payment (Thatcher 2010).

It is also stated that the headings and codes that do not appear in the official list authorized by the Committee are not considered BISAC Subject Headings (thus making all the cases of BISAC adaptation in libraries—not adoption—a different system than BISAC; see Martínez-Ávila et al. 2014 for a further discussion on this matter). However, the BISG website also states that if a heading that does not appear in the list is needed, “the Subject Codes Committee considers all requests from members of BISG and ‘the industry’ at large for topical content currently not covered by the terms in the Headings list” (BISG 2016a, emphasis added). The full revision process and creation of new headings include minor revisions to each main subject area made on an ongoing basis based on need and incoming requests (provided that they are “clear” and not “too vague to be discussed intelligently,” Harbison 2015, 13), major revisions to each main subject area that are made on a cyclical basis, changes that are annually reviewed and approved by the full BISG Membership, and, finally, new versions of the scheme that are released on an annual basis.

As a system that does not intend to reflect the whole universe of knowledge, the number of subject terms of first order has not been stable in time (i.e., the system has not always divided the universe into the same number of classes). Current BISAC 2015 has 53 subject terms of first level plus a non-classifiable term (NON000000 NON-CLASSIFIABLE) for titles that do not have subject content, i.e., a blank book and non-book products. The latest additions to the system have been “YOUNG ADULT FICTION” and “YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION.” In March 2015, the BISG’s Subject Codes Committee published a webcast discussing the inclusion of these headings, revealing some “antitrust guidelines” that included aspects such as increased scrutiny, no discussion of terms of sale, no overt or tacit suggestion of boycott and a reminder of the voluntariness of standards and best practices (BISG 2015). These guidelines showed further efforts towards neutrality and participation in the process of creation of new headings. On the other hand, the aforementioned webcast and the cited surveys that argued for the inclusion of the new headings were filled with the argument of sales as a benefit, outweighing the potential risks and problems of the inclusion. Anyhow, it was also stated that in proposals, the decision on what headings to add are discussed and made within the Subject Committee, not vetted for BISG opinion, and distributed to the BISG for final approval after the close of the edition (the Committee usually closes the edition the previous month to the implementation of that year’s version of BISAC). An example of a concrete

schedule for this process would be: gauging industry feedback from proposals (such as the BISG webcast), discussion of feedback among the Subject Committee, approaching to changes as a committee, discussion of specific headings, and issue of new edition of subjects with changes.

As a rule, the creation of new headings is currently based on five factors (Harbison 2015):

1. There should be at least 100 unique titles on the topic (published by different publishers);
2. There should not be an existing heading that is similar and that adequately covers the topic;
3. The suggested heading should describe a topic and not an author, language, audience, etc.;
4. The requested subject should not be so broad that it does not fit in a single high level heading;
5. The requested subject should not be so narrow that no other publisher would use it.

These factors have also changed over time; by 2009 there were only three factors considered as listed by Bole et al. (2009), and at least one of them has been discontinued (“the addition of the new heading should not require an extensive expansion of the list (since an effort is made to keep the number of Headings to around 3,000)”). Concerning the first factor, the claim is that there are other classification schemes (BISAC Merchandising Themes and BISAC Regional Themes) for the representation of those aspects. The first factor, clearly resembles the concept of “literary warrant,” the principle that the Library of Congress applies for the implementation of new *Library of Congress Subject Headings*. Literary warrant can be defined as the use of topics in existing publications to justify inclusion of topics in a controlled vocabulary. As the *LCSH* is based on literary warrant, theoretically, all subjects represented in the Library of Congress collection should be included in the *LCSH*, and subjects not represented in these materials should not be included in the *LCSH*. In the case of BISAC, the inclusion of new headings should fulfill an additional requirement: the existence of at least 100 unique titles from “different” publishers. The reason for this is most likely to avoid the monopolization of the creation of new headings by a strong organization specialized in a specific subject, also passing on responsibility to the “market.” This second factor and all the aforementioned references to “the industry’s” capacity to influence the scheme make up what could be called “market warrant,” the justification for the inclusion of terms in a controlled vocabulary based on publishing activities and current market demands.

In this vein, it can be said that BISAC not only follows a market warrant, but “the” American market warrant, as it is the particular view and interests of the American book

industry (both publishers and buyers) that is reflected on the system. As in the *Dewey Decimal Classification* and other LIS standards, the white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, male (WEBCHAM) is assumed to be the mainstream and the norm (see for instance Olson 2001). In the case of BISAC, the logic of these groups are also represented in the center of the system. One example of this matter was the major revision to the main subject area “RELIGION,” in 2006. According to the report submitted by Connie Harbison to the “2006 BISG Annual Report,” the Subject Codes Committee worked together with the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) to create new headings and the modification of the standard: “Throughout the year, the Subject Codes committee has worked closely with representatives from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) to revise the RELIGION section. The ultimate goal of this effort was to align the BISAC Subject Headings as closely as possible with the CPC codes so that Christian publishers could discontinue using the CPC codes and the practice of assigning both a BISAC code and a CPC code to products” (Harbison 2006, 21). The ECPA is, according to its website, a fundamentalist organization whose Mission is “to equip our members to make the Christian message more widely known” (ECPA 2016). In addition, they also have a “Statement of Faith” that cannot be in conflict with their interests: “The content produced by ECPA’s publishing members must not conflict with the Association’s Statement of Faith. The Statement of Faith of the Association is as follows:

- I. We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.
- II. We believe there is only one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- III. We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.

According to the precepts, it is easy to imagine that the treatment given to religions that are considered “idolatry.” As a consequence of this, an example of this bias in the revision of BISAC was the inclusion of twenty-nine headings for Biblical aspects (including “Biblical Biography,” “Biblical Commentary,” “Biblical Criticism & Interpretation,” “Biblical Meditations,” “Biblical Reference,” and “Biblical Studies”), fifty-three headings for Christian aspects (including “Christian Church,” “Christian Educa-

tion,” “Christian Life,” “Christian Ministry,” “Christian Rituals & Practice,” and “Christian Theology”), and twenty-six headings for “Christianity” while there were only seven headings for the entirety of “Buddhism.”

## 6.0 Inactivation of codes and the problem of reclassification

Concerning the inactivation of codes with each new release, this aspect was explained by the BISG (2014b) as follows: “Codes were inactivated when the literals they represented were deemed to be one or more of the following: Redundant; Not widely used; Easily confused with other subjects; More appropriately listed in a different section” (Note: although no longer stated on the website, these statements were also repeated in previous lists of differences between editions since at least 2010). The second cited aspect, the fact that a code was not widely used, is closely related to the concept of “market warrant” too. Moreover, the BISG also states that (emphasis added):

It is highly recommended that inactivated codes which have already been assigned to titles be replaced ... *Since it may not be possible or practical to locate and replace all occurrences of inactivated code*, note that BISG will never re-assign inactivated codes to another literal.

Therefore, although it is recommended that inactivated codes be replaced by active codes, it is also recognized that replacing all occurrences of inactivated codes might not be possible in practice (the old problem of reclassification). This problem is partially solved with the “quarantine” of the inactivated codes, which means that with each new release of BISAC, old books that were categorized with inactivated codes will never mix with other books that have new active codes since both groups will always have different codes. However, the true solution to this problem is given by the BISAC “Tutorial and FAQ” (BISG 2016a):

What happens if I do not deactivate the inactivated headings [codes]? The Subject Codes Committee anticipates that most users would not re-categorize backlog. After all, in due time, most titles with inactivated codes will go out of print and the heading [codes] will retire with the books. Receivers of inactivated headings [codes] have a decision to make. They must decide whether to maintain such headings [codes], often leading to duplication or near duplication within their subject database, or they must re-categorize titles in the database with such headings [codes].

It also adds:

What should I do about titles previously coded with inactive headings [codes]? Ideally, it would be appropriate to re-categorize these titles, particularly if they will stay in print for a number of years—although as noted above, we recognize that this is not always practical, especially for users with large databases. Maintaining such headings [codes] in an in-house database is a viable option. However, if the heading [codes] are to be sent to trading partners, bringing the headings [codes] up to date is preferable.

Therefore, the solution to this problem seems to be much simpler than one might expect. Recognizing the difficulties of reclassification, a system in which reclassification is not strictly needed is provided. In this case, the market is what, in due time and in a natural way, will retire all those books categorized with deactivated codes. However, this method, that might be valid for bookstores and publishers, might not be so adequate for libraries adopting BISAC as a classification scheme, since in the latter case, the speed of retiring books from the catalog is not (or should not be) as fast as in the case of items going out of stock in bookstores (this aspect has also been discussed in Martínez-Ávila and Kipp 2014). In short, and despite all the advice in the BISG website, the problem of reclassification with BISAC has been not totally solved.

## 7.0 Use of BISAC in libraries

On May 30, 2007, *The Arizona Republic* announced that Perry Branch Library located in the town of Gilbert in the Maricopa County Library District would be “the first public library in the nation whose entire collection was categorized without the Dewey Decimal Classification System” (Wingett 2007). Despite not being exactly true that it was the first library in the United States to drop Dewey, Perry Branch Library did mark a milestone in the field as the first public library in the United States to adopt the book industry standard BISAC instead of Dewey as the classification system for organizing the collection. Perry Branch Library opened in June 2007, and for the organization of its 24,000-item collection, 50 BISAC headings were used instead of Dewey. This idea had been previously devised by director Harry Courtright in 2005, and was implemented in 2007 by adult services coordinator Marshall Shore with the opening of the Perry Branch, although Nanci Hill, Head of Readers’ Services at the Nevins Memorial Library in Methuen, Massachusetts, states that the beginning of the concept was a pilot plan in two libraries in Delaware County (PA) in 1988 (Hill 2010). According to Amy Wang, of “The Arizona Republic”

(2009), the conversion plan for the system in the Perry Branch took nearly five years, although county officials say that by 2009 it only took from one to two months to make a library Dewey-less. After the Perry Branch, the second library going Dewey-less in Maricopa County Library District was the Queen Creek Branch, newly opened in November 2008. Following Queen Creek several other branches, like Robson, Goodyear and Sun City, adopted BISAC too. By August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the date on which Harry Courtright retired, eight of Maricopa’s 17 libraries were using BISAC, and three more branches were scheduled for conversion in that year (Kelley 2011).

Although a strict adoption of BISAC was used in the beginning, this situation changed and the standard was eventually modified and adapted to the needs of the community as well as to the size and complexity of the collection. According to Norman Oder (2007), Maricopa originally outsourced all the cataloging for the project, and Brodart, which provided the opening day collection, worked to translate Dewey to the new system. In addition, library staff also worked with Baker & Taylor to choose the right subheadings (Schneider 2007). According to Jennifer Miele of Maricopa County Library District, working closely with vendors is considered a vital part of the project when what is wanted is to add libraries to the BISAC-based scheme in a consortium or system (Fister 2009).

Since its opening, Maricopa County Library District has inspired many other libraries willing to get rid of Dewey and has conducted more than sixty tours for librarians from all over the United States, Canada, and South America. Martínez-Ávila et al. (2014) analyzed a total of fourteen libraries that adopted (or adapted to some degree) BISAC after the experience of Maricopa as new cases of reader-interest classifications. In this study, the authors concluded that one of the biggest assets of BISAC for its survival would be the standardization and centralization provided by the BISG, something that is not always strictly followed by libraries using the system due to the characteristics of the library as an institution. In addition, several libraries have discontinued the project or reported reverting some of the BISAC features after a not-so-satisfying experience (see for instance Barnett 2010).

## 8.0 Future of BISAC

As an American standard, the use of BISAC was initially confined to the American industry and American libraries. However, the role and involvement of global institutions such as OCLC, use by services such as Google Books and other ebooks platforms, and its mapping not only to the *Dewey Decimal Classification* but also to other national book industry standards worldwide such as the British BIC (see Martínez-Ávila et al. 2012a; 2012b), en-

sure a global relevance in the present and the near future. In the mid-to-long term, it is possible for BISAC to be replaced by its international global counterpart Thema, “the new, global subject classification scheme” (as recognized by BISG’s Julie Morris 2014), especially considering the involvement of not only the BISG but also other dominant industry leaders such as the British BIC and Booknet Canada. But for now, BISAC to Thema and BIC to BISAC mappings are being distributed with the BISAC license since the 2013 version and the American book industry is among the leading ones.

## 9.0 Conclusion

As a system that is used to organize knowledge (i.e., a KOS), among the different approaches to KO (see Hjørland 2016), BISAC would fall into the practicalist and intuitivist approaches. The development of BISAC is not based on scientific or educational consensus, as commercial bookstores do not always seek to fulfill those purposes, and libraries adopting the system emphasize the recreational side of libraries and the need to adapt to the caprices of the market (see Martínez-Ávila and Kipp 2014 for a further argument on this matter). BISAC does not follow a facet-analytic approach either, as it is mainly an enumerative and alphabetical system. The development of BISAC is not based on user-based or cognitive approaches, as users (buyers) are not surveyed and reflected on the system, but the publishers and BISG members express their opinion on what might sell best. It is well accepted in critical circles, that marketing and the market do not always reflect what consumers want, but try to establish trends and dictate what they desire. Finally, BISAC does not follow a domain-analytic approach either, the interests and points of views of the different communities are not considered. BISAC is a system that is driven by the intuitive knowledge and estimations of the market on potential sales and editorial activities. BISAC is practicalist, because it was devised as a practical way to exchange and organize information according to the industry convenience (especially regarding standardization and centralization). While initially intended for its use just in the book industry and bookstores, it was later exported to libraries and other platforms with the participation and compliance of OCLC and other actors. However, in that second moment, the epistemology of BISAC did not change a bit. At most, OCLC tried to unify the system with the DDC, through mappings, for the sake of convenience.

It might be said that BISAC, in some way, indicates that the initiative of developing new systems have moved from the library sector to other sectors (such as the book industry). However, while following the same logic and approaches in its development, as in the case of the DDC

(and not departing from it as some library adopters enthusiastically believed), it did not take too long to get the involvement of OCLC and other LIS actors. While the system did not adapt too much to the LIS community, BISAC advocates within the community tried to change the LIS community by highlighting the necessities and benefits of borrowing ideas from the commercial sector.

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