Editorial

Classification and its Practice

A few days ago somebody asked me on the telephone: how do I go about constructing a classification system?

What would you have answered? I think we classificationists know quite well how *we* would tackle any given assignment of this sort. However, in order to help in such a case one would like to refer to a textbook on how to design a classification system (CS). Does any exist?

When S.R. Ranganathan had assembled enough experience with the construction of the schedules of his Colon Classification and had developed a theory for its further elaboration, thus being ready to transfer his knowledge, he proposed to the FID Council — it was in 1955 — to hold an "International Summer School on Designing of Documentation Classification". The 4-page proposal contained several brilliant ideas for the improvement of classification work and on organizational questions. But these ideas were not taken up. Instead, it was resolved to hold an "International Study Conference on Classification" in May 1957 at Dorking, England. This event marked the beginning of a series of FID/CR International Study Conferences, of which the 5th one will take place in Canada in summer 1990. On the one hand the Dorking Conference was a necessary start for classification theorists and practitione'rs to exchange their knowledge and pinpoint research areas. It must, however, be deeply deplored that in this way the necessary knowledge on CS design was not explicated and has never been documented in a textbook. There are some articles by S.R. Ranganathan on the design of depth schedules as well as a recent book by M.A. Gopinath, but these relate to the Colon Classification and cannot, therefore, be generalized.

But there exists at least one attempt to summarize the theoretical and practical preconditions for CS design in the form of the German standard DIN 32705 "Classification Systems, their establishment and development", 12 p. (issued by the German Institute for Standardization, Berlin, 1987). This standard is meant as an introduction for those not having any idea of what is involved and therefore need some guidance in constructing a classification system. When I asked a DIN official whether this standard was intended to be translated and fed into the working data of the International Standardization Organisation (ISO) I was told — to my very great surprise — that this standard was not considered necessary for inclusion in the ISO work.

Now, if ISO does not take up the idea of using an English translation of this German Standard to further disseminate its ideas and rules as well as to inform other countries on the existence of such a tool, classificationists should become active themselves and do something about it. This could be accomplished either through the possibilities of FID/CR or through other channels, for instance through this journal. The fact that there are so many amateurishly developed schemes, not based on any theory nor rules, has done great damage to the reputation of our field of knowledge. It has led to the common opinion that classification is something subjective and something that is not only superfluous but also misleading. Nor can we deny that the inconsistencies and inadequacies of some of the existing general schemes have likewise contributed to such thinking.

There is a wide new area of application of this knowledge which would be very much in need of an available recommendation for CS design and construction. These are all those efforts towards establishment of systematic or concept-oriented glossaries, as e.g. the ones started with the new Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences by F.W. Riggs. The entries of this Encyclopedia are not alphabetically arranged terms followed by long descriptions of the implications of their concepts, but rather systematically arranged definitions together with the terms assigned to them. This means that in this Encyclopedia the onomasiological approach has been preferred over the previous semasiological one. This new form of arrangement presupposes therefore a systematic arrangement approached via an alphabetical index of the possible terms used for a given concept. And there may be many other new terminological applications as this field is growing rather explosive. But how to go about systematizing concepts?

I would therefore encourage classificationists interested in the progress of our field of concern to work towards the establishment of a guideline and/or a textbook on CS design and construction so that any newcomer will receive the necessary instruction and will not be left alone to create another impossible scheme not serving its purposes adequately.

In the present issue we are dealing with a number of very practical problems: From H. Haendler we learn about the special problems connected with classification and indexing work in data/fact documentation. Although he gathered his experience in a very specialized field of agriculture, namely the feed of our useful animals, his findings may be generalized to embrace other knowledge fields as well.

The article by E.R. Sukiasyan, "Classification Practice in the USSR," reports on the practical work which has been accomplished in the USSR with the creation of the Library-Bibliographical Classification.

In the contribution by L. Gouiedo on statistical classification — an all-time first in this journal — it can be very clearly seen how the identification of classes made mutually exclusive by utilizing the complementary/opposition relationship will furnish most remarkable insights if combined with statistical countings. We are also happy to call attention to the highly practical work done in the USA in establishing a Unified Medical Language System — see the report by Mrs. B.L. Humphreys, p. 85. This latter work could become a model for other fields as well (law, technology, the social sciences, etc). We should look forward to hearing more about the experiences made. Here at least an attempt is made to work towards unification — as proposed already in the Unisist Report of 1971.

Shouldn't we become more serious about developing our field so as to correspond better to the needs of science and technology of today?

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