



Global subject categories and digital discovery: the Next Big Idea?

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The Nielsen logo is contained within a white circle. It features the word "nielsen" in a lowercase, blue, sans-serif font. Below the word are seven small, black, circular dots arranged in a horizontal line.

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Presentation Overview

- Put into context of Big Ideas in book trade standards
- Compare the major subject schemes (BIC & BISAC)
- Look at the historical context of the schemes
- And the current online / digital environment
- Along the way, propose 7 Essential Features of a new scheme for the digital age

A Brief History of Big Ideas

- 1970: ISO publish the ISBN standard
- 1995: BISG (Book Industry Study Group) launch BISAC Subject Headings
- 1998: BIC launch the BIC Standard Subject Categories
- 2000: AAP release ONIX
- 2009: ISO publish the ISTC (International Standard Text Code) standard
- And...

A Brief History of Big Ideas, continued

- 2011: Scott Lubeck presents paper to BISG Governing Council: *The Requirement for an International Taxonomy in the Digital Age*
- Scott resigned soon after
- Need to regain momentum for this initiative

Subject classification: the current situation

- *“Subject classification has been primarily devised to encourage sales of physical product; and the situation we are now in is a legacy of that history.”*
- *“...territory matters in bricks and mortar.”*

- Scott Lubeck

- Indeed, while the other Big Idea standards are genuinely international, the classification schemes are used in specific territories

Current schemes: **BISAC**

- In North America, **BISAC Subject Headings** Scheme reigns supreme
- Required/recognised by most US & Canadian booksellers
- Used by Bowker (along with own scheme), Ingram, B&T, BookScan US

Current schemes: **BIC**

- In UK, and English-language markets outside N America, the **BIC Subject Category Scheme** is dominant
- Also translated/variant versions in Europe (Italy, Sweden, Spain)
- Used by Nielsen (and often converted to proprietary schemes for UK booksellers)
- Required by TitlePage, the Australian P&A service

Current schemes: ONIX also recognises

DDC-Sachgruppen der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie

Tabla de materias ISBN

Warengruppen-Systematik des deutschen Buchhandels

Schlagwort-Normdatei (SWD)

Children's Book Marketing Categories (CBMC)

Thèmes Electre

Nederlandstalige Uniforme Rubrieksindeling (NUR)

ECPA Christian Book Category

Bokgrupper / Varegrupper / Suomalainen kirja-alan luokitus / Kaunokki

BSQ / **JEL** / **RVM** / **YSA** / **YSO**

ANELE Materias

Varugrupper / SAB / Läromedel / Förhandsbeskrivning

C-Code / Genre-Code

And there's more...

- *plus* bookseller proprietary schemes
- *plus* specialist & niche schemes (medical, legal, etc)
- *plus* BookScan's Product Class scheme, used to measure and analyse sales data & trends
- *equals* what Michael Tamblyn of Kobo (trading across Europe) memorably termed

MAP-O-RAMA

Map-O-Rama means

- Users have to map or convert between different schemes when communicating with different partners – or even within their own company (eg US and UK divisions)
- BIC <> BISAC mappings developed separately by Nielsen, BISG, Bowker, Baker & Taylor, etc
- Issue of maintenance when schemes are updated
- Different mappings, different quality = different outcome
- Loss of control, loss of precision = loss of discoverability and loss of sales

Mapping problems

Scott says: “ a good and helpful subject classification assigned in one market will inevitably be **degraded** when mapped to meet the needs of the other.”

The problem is widely recognised as inefficient and unsatisfactory – any conversion risks loss of value

Others agree

- *“The problem with any automatic mapping is that it **removes control**, ... codes we choose are reinterpreted by systems and it makes our classification **less robust**.”*

– Alfred Willmann
Bibliographic Director, Random House Group
- *“Having separate classification schemes that do not always cross-map is inefficient, can lead to **confusion and possible misinterpretation** of information. Not to mention the extra work created.”*

– Karina Luke
Digital & Data Supply Chain Manager, Penguin Group UK

A Common Scheme?

- To end Map-O-Rama, we need to consider a common scheme that can overcome territorial limits
- We are hearing informally of a defence of BISAC – that it must remain for bricks & mortar use, and that any new scheme should be *additional* to it
- But this will not solve Map-O-Rama, and BIC will push for a single Common Scheme
- Indeed BIC is already undergoing changes towards this end

BIC current development

- BIC is being adapted for pan-European use
- Initiative launched at LBF this year
- Detailed input from Spain, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Portugal
- Also interest from the Arab world
- Will evolve into a new scheme that can then be presented to the initiative for a Common Scheme
- This leads us to the first Essential Feature of any new scheme

Essential Feature 1: Make it Global

- Need to develop a genuinely Global scheme, not just a transatlantic deal (despite dominance of UK, US and English language)
- Emerging markets are not as advanced as US and UK but are catching up and will want to trade
- Digital trading is increasingly global trading
- A Global scheme recognises and facilitates entry for emerging markets, and can exploit worldwide demand for English language books

A Global Scheme

*“For a publishing house like Bloomsbury with a genuinely global reach, the advent of a consolidated subject classification system is particularly welcome. I can think of **no-one, from buyers and reps, from system administrators to online shoppers, who wouldn’t stand to benefit...**”*

– Thom Bonneville

Business Systems Manager, Bloomsbury Publishing

- *“A single scheme would also hopefully make it easier to encourage more publishers to devote resource to classification to **improve** both the **volume** of classification and to enhance **the level of expertise** applied to the task.”*

– Evelyn Nicholas

Business Analyst (UK), Bowker

A Global Scheme

- *“Subject classification now more than ever plays a key part in the discoverability of our products and, as the industry trades on an increasingly global scale, would benefit from being internationally harmonised....”*

*This can only benefit us all, and ultimately help our UK and international consumers **find what they want** more speedily and accurately.”*

– Karina Luke

Digital & Data Supply Chain Manager, Penguin Group (UK)

Essential 2: Designed for Online use

- Ebooks/digital content now 10% of US book sales and doubling annually
- Online retailing now firmly established and growing – for both physical and digital books
- Huge growth in number of products (Nielsen added over a million new ISBNs in single year)
- What challenges does this new environment present, and what opportunities, for subject classification?

Do we need subject classification online?

- Is any traditional subject category scheme fit for purpose in the growth areas of digital products, online retailing?
- Scott has his doubts: *“whether the strict application of either [BIC or BISAC] – designed as they are for “bricks and mortar” environments – **online** is insufficient and will ultimately inhibit the discovery of book content.”*
- Concerned that *“subject classification may be too limiting a lens through which to look at this problem”*

Yes, we do still need subject classification

- This may be just an issue of semantics, but I would argue that existing subject classification schemes can evolve to meet the needs the of online consumers
- Though of course there have been massive changes in the industry
- It's worth reminding ourselves of the conditions in which the BISAC and BIC schemes were launched

USA 1995: BISAC launched

- Bill Clinton in the White House
- Top selling books include Grisham's The Rainmaker and Bill Gates' The Road Ahead
- Pete Sampras wins Wimbledon, and...
- Amazon.com launched

UK 1998: BIC launched

- Tony Blair is Prime Minister
- Top selling books include Pullman's *The Subtle Knife* and Delia's comeback *How to Cook*
- Pete Sampras wins Wimbledon, and...
- Amazon.co.uk launched

THEN

- Go to bookshop
- Browse labelled shelves
- Ask expert advice (CDROM/stock system)
- Buy UK (US) edition of physical book
- Published by UK (US) publisher
- (Ebooks were emerging from Project Gutenberg – into a proliferation of formats, and very few sales)

NOW

digital content
platforms
readers
downloads
channel partners
online retailing
POD
apps
viral marketing
formats
social networking
enhanced ebooks
the cloud
DRM
global market

Online tools / consumer behaviour

- Scott says: *“We need to research and understand current best practices for online discovery of book-like content... Surgical buying (where I only buy exactly what I know I’m searching for) online isn’t a strategy; it’s the outcome of poor tools for discovering related content.”*
- Online buyers have access to:
 - proprietary categories
 - personal ratings & reviews
 - ‘people who bought this, bought that’
 - full text searching
 - tagging, tag clouds, “folksonomies”
- How does a generic scheme fit in? Let us go back to first principles....

What is subject classification for?

- Subject Classification is used:
 - Along with title and author, as the other key access point by which consumers can identify books they want (find related material irrespective of appearance)
 - To transmit subject information between trading partners, to inform purchasing
 - To provide a common language for sales reporting, enable meaningful comparisons, identify trends
- *ALL THESE REQUIREMENTS STILL APPLY*
- Even more important as products proliferate, and book buying is increasingly unmediated by experts

Context for searching

- Subject classification can give CONTEXT to online searching where required
- Not a rigid hierarchical scheme, but some controlled interlinked set of subject values
- In conjunction with the other tools, such as tagging and text searches
- Cannot rely on serendipity alone
- But still much to learn about how to work with other online tools

Essential 3: Keep it Simple

- Scott says *“Such a scheme may be simpler than legacy schemes on one level, but may link to a broader, more flexible and better structured underlying taxonomy which will provide more powerful and intuitive means of search and discovery than have been possible in the past”*
- To be global and to work with online tools, the scheme must be both initially simple and extensible
- Concentrate on what is most common, and most useful

Essential 4: Classify by Work, not Product

- To avoid metadata bloat, systems become Content-centric rather than Product-centric
- Normalised Data
- Arranged by Works (adopt ISTC)
- Even if data still only made public at Product level, the classification is **consistent** across all versions
- So *Bleak House* is Classic Fiction, no matter how it is manifested, formatted, packaged

Essential 5: Keep it Objective, Impartial

- Booksellers tend to want as many books as possible to be found by any search
- Publishers tend to want their books to be found under as many searches as possible
- Consumers just want to find the products that best fit their needs
- Sales reporting needs to compare like with like
- Best way to avoid chaos over conflicting aims is mediation by neutral expert agency – natural part of data aggregation services

Essential 6: Responsive yet Controlled

- Clear procedures for the maintenance and updating of the scheme
- Criteria for additions and amendments
- Open but moderated – avoid steamrolling by interest groups
- Version control, translation, national representatives
- Governance, funding

Essential 7: New Name

- Distinct from existing schemes, especially BIC & BISAC
- International, multilingual use (no need to translate)
- Suggestions welcome

Summary of Essential Features

1. Needs to be Global
2. Designed for use with online tools
3. Initially simple, but extensible
4. Class by Work, support normalised data
5. Objective & impartial – need specialist monitoring
6. Responsive, flexible, but controlled
7. Decide what to call it

Next steps

- Complete European/International version of BIC scheme
- BIC visit to BISG in September
- Secure agreement for BISG/BIC collaboration
- Invite stakeholders from other key markets
- Consult widely
- Research taxonomies and strategies for online discovery
- Define scope, implementation plan and budget
- You can get involved through BIC

Thank
you!

- www.bic.org.uk/7/BIC-Standard-Subject-Categories/
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