BISAC: Coming to a library near you?

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Libraries throughout the country utilize classification systems, developed by library organizations, to organize their collections such as the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress classification systems. However, since 2007 several libraries from across the country have switched over to a system not even developed by a library organization. Developed by publishers and booksellers, BISAC (Book Industry Standards & Communications) subject headings assist in standardization of electronic information between trading partners, database searching and shelving guidance for retailers. Thirty-five years after BISAC’s first development libraries from across the country are now adopting these subject categories to use in place or alongside other classification systems. Should all libraries consider switching from their present systems to one originally developed for publishers and book retailers? Several libraries credit the use of BISAC headings to improved patron satisfaction. Are BISAC subject headings a valid method to use in libraries to organize their collections?

So what are BISAC codes? Back in November of 1975 a few publishers and manufacturers met during the Book Manufacturers Institute conference to discuss improving the research capabilities of the book industry. Eventually, in February 1976, BISG (Book Industry Study Group) a not-for-profit organization was created. Over the years this group has researched topics relating to the innovations in digital publishing, impacts of the book industry on the environment, consumer purchasing habits, and the standardizing of practices within the industry. Some components of their standardization are the management of BISAC Subject Headings, ONIX for Books and X12 e-commerce transactions. BISAC Subject Headings, also known as BISAC Subject Codes List, are used “to standardize the electronic transfer of subject information between trading partners.” (Book Industry Study Group website, 2012) These headings describe
the topical content of the book for categorization purposes so publishers, distributors and retailers can track it through the supply chain as well as assisting in shelving books in bookstores and in genre searches in databases. In the 2011 version of the subject headings list there are 51 major subjects and these are broken down further into over 3000 subcategories. This isn’t even counting the additional sub-subcategories created by adding Merchandizing Themes or Regional Themes. A list of the current headings can be viewed on the Book Industry Study Group’s website (http://www.bisg.org/).

Bookstores take these major categories and utilize them to shelve their books for display with the idea that their patrons will easily locate and purchase them. Libraries, from across the nation, have noticed the ease at which customers locate books in bookstores and decided to convert their classification systems over to the bookstores’ system. In June of 2007 the Perry Branch of the Maricopa County Library District in Arizona was one of the first libraries to convert over to using BISAC subject headings for their classification. (Oder, 2007) As of 2011 the district has either converted or opened nine more ‘Dewey-less’ libraries and each is using BISAC. (Maricopa County Library District, Arizona website, 2012) Director for Maricopa, Harry Courtright, always wished to find a better way to classify books than with Dewey. A survey of their patrons revealed that 75 – 85 percent did not visit the library for a specific item but instead just to browse. (Wang, 2009) Dewey didn’t lend itself to browsing in their belief. To accommodate for browsing they adopted BISAC since bookstores were seemingly more attractive for browsing. The Maricopa Libraries use the BISAC headings as they are listed on BISG’s website to divide their collection into subject sections and then within the subject sections they arrange the books alphabetically by author and title.
Whereas the Rangeview Library District in Colorado adapted the BISAC subject headings by dividing the categories into more specific subject sections and in some cases creating their own categories. They saw the success of Maricopa County Library District and in 2009 opened their first ‘Dewey-less’ branch. According to Rangeview’s website (http://www.anythinklibraries.org/), by the end of that year, they had converted all their branches over to their adapted BISAC method of classification which they call ‘WordThink’. They considered classification with words instead of numbers to be practical and more in line with how patrons would naturally search for materials. (Anythink website, 2012)

“At Rangeview, our main focus is to provide exemplary service to our customers and WordThink is just one more example of how Rangeview puts its customers first, by making our traditional library environments easier to use, resulting in friendlier experiences,” says Rangeview’s director Pam Sandlian Smith. (Anythink website, 2012, page Rangeview library district is breaking up with Dewey)

Another library that adapted their present system with BISAC’s subject idea is the Darien Public Library in Connecticut, they thought that Dewey did a good job of breaking some categories down by subject but in other cases it separated subjects. To make these items easier to find they divided the collection into eight ‘glades’ or broad categories. They moved the Dewey shelves around to fit into these subject based categories. The area that this change became most noticeable was in the children’s department. Not only did they rearrange the books by subject they also color coded the books. (Fister, 2009) Due to these organizational efforts Gretchen Hams-Caserotti, head of Darien’s children’s services, made the comment that “even pre-reading children know that books about trucks can be found in the red section…” (Fister, 2009, para. 19)
Hams-Caserotti also noted that circulation had improved 30 percent each month since the switch took place and was still growing. (Fister, 2009)

Other libraries have switched over to 'Dewey-less' systems, some created their own alternative systems but a considerable number use BISAC directly or adapt it into their own version. Improving customer service drives their decisions to transform their classification systems. The goal is to make the patron feel at ease and help them become more independent in their search for material. As one patron said after visiting one such library, “The books everywhere…have been shelved, labeled, and organized in a way that makes me feel less like a moron and more empowered to find what I’m looking for on my own.” (Fister, 2009, para. 1)

However, Wayne Wiegand, professor of library and information studies at Florida State University agrees that libraries need to respond to patrons wants but then continues to say Dewey may have its “faults but so does any other classification scheme.” (Fister, 2009, para. 10)

So how is BISAC different from other systems of classification and subject headings? According to the OCLC website the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system is used more than any other classification system in the world and it is intended to be used for collections of 20,000 or fewer items. (OCLC website, 2012) Dewey is not just shelf location. It is divided into ten disciplines of study not subjects. Each of the ten main disciplines is subdivided into ten additional categories and those subcategories are once again divided into ten more. Even though all of these sub-subcategories have not been assigned a name this system still has at least 1000 categories in which to classify works. It is capable of dividing large collections into more specific categories than BISAC can. A librarian who thought libraries, who use Dewey, arrange books better than bookstores made the comment, “Dewey allows for a level of ‘granulation’ in topic areas that general subject areas such as those in bookstores cannot duplicate.” (Fister, 2009,
para. 16) If you wish to find a book on the American Revolution using BISAC you would have to go to the section for History then look for the title in amongst all the other books classified History. In most cases the books with in a section are arranged alphabetically by author’s name. However, if you use Dewey you would discover that all American Revolution books are placed in the History/History of North America/History of United States/time period 1775-1789 section (973.3). A person can enter the library seeking one book on a topic and possibly find multiple other books on the same topic without searching through shelves of books just by looking at the books that surround the originally sought after item. According to Kate Sheehan, knowledge and learning services librarian at Darien Library in Connecticut, “Dewey is great for the grab-and-goers….” (Fister, 2009, para. 20) Meaning that those who come to the library knowing what they want usually use the catalog to find the location of their desired item, get it, and leave. They did not come to browse. Those that come to browse for a book might find the library organized by subjects, BISAC, more convenient. In the second half of Sheehan’s quote she says, “Dewey is not so great for the destination users. Cooking is in technology. Gardening is in arts and recreation. Don’t those two make more sense with each other?” (Fister, 2009, p. 20) It is possible to browse with Dewey; you just need to know what number is assigned to the subject that interests you. On the other hand, within Dewey, some subjects are located in more than one category if it pertains to more than one discipline of study. For example cats will be located in 808 (cats in literature), 636 (cat breeds), and 599 (mammals).

Academic libraries and larger public libraries use another organization system that was developed by the Library of Congress. Library of Congress Classification (LCC) system divides items into 21 main categories and once again these are divided into multiple subcategories. LCC uses one or a combination of two alpha characters to represent the main and first subcategory of
each class and then numerical characters for further granulation. Due to the presence of more main categories, before breaking down into subcategories, LCC is capable of finely classifying larger collections than DCC. However just as with DCC, one subject may be in several classes if the topic crosses over into other topics. Being this system is even larger than Dewey it has many of the same draw backs and advantages of Dewey compared to BISAC.

Since BISAC really is more of a subject headings list and not a classification system we should compare it to another subject headings list. The Library of Congress’s Subject Headings (LCSH) list is one of the most widely used for cataloging in the United States. (Abbas, 2010) This system, originally made for use at the Library of Congress to catalog its collection, includes a massive list of terms for categorizing items. The function of these terms is for identification, collocation and evaluation of items in a collection. The LCSH list is much larger than the BISAC list but it was originally made for a much larger and continually growing collection. BISAC was not originally made for a collection but for an inventory. Publishers and booksellers want to sell the books on their shelves so their ‘collections’ will most likely not continue to grow. As new books enter the market and become popular the sales of other books decrease. Smaller collections do not need to have as many terms to distinguish items from each other, as a larger collection would need. However, the BISAC’s subject list does have an advantage. Karen Schneider in her article Raising Arizona on the ALA Techsource website comments, “BISAC codes are pragmatically user-centric; they’re designed to make it easy for customers to browse for books. The language is simple, the subcategories broad, and the main groupings are designed around user browsing and buying habits…” (Schneider, 2007, para. 12) The book industry uses terms that the general public would use to make locating desired materials convenient for the customers. Due to this commonly used language the Phoenix Public Library decided to include
BISAC in their MARC records to enrich the searching capabilities of their collection. “BISAC levels of specificity complement LC Subject Headings, allowing patrons to drill down a topic in an intuitive system of guided navigation.” (Fister, 2009, para. 25)

Accusations of biases and discrimination towards each of the previously mentioned systems have occurred in the past. BISAC subject headings would also receive the same criticism. This system should acquire more charges of biasness than the others should since it has fewer terms. The BISAC subject list is a specialized type of controlled vocabulary such as MeSH (Medical Subject Headings); the list’s creation was specifically intended for the book industry, it was not meant to encompass all the knowledge of the world. Each organizing system will “reflect the biases of their creators and might be designed to achieve or subvert goals…” (Glushko, 2011, page15) To make matters worse, the assigning of the subject headings to a book originates with the authors, publishers, or editors of the work. They suggest the headings that they wish to have assigned to the book. The publisher wishes to sell as many copies as possible to make a profit so they may choose the widest category possible to appeal to the widest population. Additionally, bestselling categories may be applied to a book in hopes of attracting attention even though the category may not fit the book exactly. (Editors, 2005) Due to the nature of the broad terms, headings may become overused to a point where patrons may not trust the content of a book placed in that category. As an example of this Katherine LeCroy, Christian section manager at Davis-Kidd bookstore in Nashville warns her coworkers not to trust the “Inspirational” designation in every book. (Reid, 2010) “I just don’t think it’s a very useful category,” says LeCroy. “My frustration comes from publishers who use it so much that it’s become a watered-down word. You see everything from prayer to fiction to books on liturgy and everything in between labeled as Inspiration. But what does that mean? The Bible can be
construed as inspirational.” (Reid, 2010, para. 14) So BISAC would have just as many if not more problems with accusations of biases. Academic books also have a problem with subject headings being too broad. Certain fields of study do not have a subject heading with their name in the BISAC list. Sociology for example would be under Social Science and most of the sciences like Biology and Chemistry are under the general category ‘Science’. (Thatcher, 2010)

Assisting bookstores to know where to place books on their shelves was one of the original reasons for the creation of BISAC headings. Wendell Lotz, Chair of the BISAC General Committee who joined the sub-committee in 1996, told Publishing Trends in an interview that one of the reasons the coding was invented was to “help the $7-an-hour clerk in the store get the book to right shelf.” (Editors, 2005, para. 8) This implies the book industry is trying to make less work for the bookstores and that even a clerk without knowledge of book organization would be able to place the book correctly. The employee would know immediately where to place the book for display. Additional, the subject headings will be entered into the stores database so that a customer’s search will be accomplished with ease. So if it is created for the ease of the clerk to shelve the book you could summarize that it would be easy for the customer to find the book. With this reasoning we can deduce that using BISAC in a library would make finding books by patrons more convenient. In today’s economy this convenience can be applied in another aspect of the library. Many libraries have the need to cut back on staffing hours due to decreases budgets. The San José Public Library in California adopted the bookstore method of classification when their circulation increased but their number of staff did not increase. Due to a lack of man hours they needed to find timesaving strategies. They went to a system of direct shelving that saved them time in re-shelving. The books are roughly sorted by subject when they are returned and then placed onto the shelves. Many of their books end up not being placed back
into their Dewey locations but instead they are placed in a “Marketplace”, a collection of new and popular materials, close to the entrance of the library. (Fister, 2009)

Besides the economy creating changes in libraries there has also been a move of libraries adopting the features of the information commons style of institution. Partially this trend has developed from the recent popularity of bookstores. Bookstores in the past couple of decades have been adding features to attract customers into the stores. The additions of comfortable seating areas and cafés have attracted people to frequent the shops and stay for extended periods. Appeal of free internet access draws in the technology craving generations. Bookstores offering programming for all ages attracts some people into bookstores that may never have traditionally gone. Libraries have noticed this flooding of people to the bookstores, in some cases they have lost patrons to them. Many have implemented the same changes in their institutions to increase or regain patron usage. Libraries now can be found with all of these features plus more. In the Maricopa library mentioned earlier the district built the building in a fashion that mimics bookstores with “nooks and crannies aimed to create a sense of intimacy and privacy.” (Oder, 2007, para. 2) These changes accompanied the change to their classification system to BISAC headings. Question remains, which attracted the patrons more, the new atmosphere, programs, cafés or the books being arranged by subjects. Many other libraries have switched to an information commons style library that never changed their arrangement of the materials. These libraries have also increased their circulations and number of patron usage. Academic libraries generally do not use non-traditional methods of classification. Multiple academic libraries have adopted features of an information commons and they have increased the number of patrons visiting their libraries. (Britto, 2011)
Another feature within information commons includes signage that helps direct patrons to areas of interest around the library. When Maricopa and Rangeview libraries switched over to using BISAC based headings they also added signage to the bookshelves to identify the subject areas in each section. (Fialkoff, 2009) Some libraries have been doing this for years along with Dewey. To assist patrons, signs have been added to the end caps of bookshelves with the call numbers, but many libraries have gone one-step further by placing words to describe the subjects included within those shelves. Would not all patrons have an easier time of locating the subject fields of their choice to browse if all libraries would create signage that was attractive and easy to spot? In an online survey conducted by Barbara Fister in 2009 she asked librarians what opinion they had of Dewey. In the results 26.9 percent responded that we should keep Dewey but that better signage would help patrons find what they wanted easier. Over forty eight percent said Dewey could be improved if categories were combined and words were added to the call numbers to indicate the subject area included. (Fister, 2009) So even though the librarians say Dewey should still be used they admit that better signage would help patrons. The librarian from the West Palm Beach Library in Florida commented that their library had the best of both worlds. People that came to the library to browse for a book were able to enter the library and see the area they wished to browse easily due to their signage. However, if they came in for a specific book they could use the card catalog to locate its exact location since they still used a modified Dewey system. (Fialkoff, 2009)

The purpose of an organizing system is to arrange things so that they can be located later. In each of the libraries mentioned above that have made the switch to BISAC all of them suggested that their patrons have located items within the shelves with ease. A librarian needs to consider their patrons needs over those of the librarian’s when making a decision on what would
be best for their institution. People who use the library do not really care about what system of organization a library uses as long as they are able to find what they want. Each library is unique in their clientele and community and not one style of operation will fit all places. Many libraries have proven that they are very successful using a more traditional classification system; there is no need to consider a switch. BISAC codes seem to be very successful in smaller libraries, but generally libraries with larger collections wish to retain a system that is capable of refining a subject down more due to more books within each subject field. The reason DDC is not used very often in academic institutions is because of the size of the collection, LCC has more refinement and is more suitable for larger libraries. If a larger library would switch over to BISAC subject headings, without refining the subject areas, patrons may have difficulty locating items within the broad subject areas. However the use of BISAC subject headings has proved to be very successful in many communities and if patrons are satisfied who can deny that BISAC codes are a valid form of classification for libraries. Each library should evaluate their clientele to determine if a switch would be appropriate. Maybe all that would be necessary to improve patron searching capabilities would be better signage of materials. Or maybe all the patrons want is more of the comforts of the bookstore or information commons style libraries.
References


