

A Report
to the
Hennepin County Library Board
and to the
Hennepin County Board of Commissioners

The Selection of a Classification System
for the Book Collection of the County Library

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HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY
POSITION ON
CLASSIFICATION: LC or DC

by

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FOREWARD

Sound management practice makes it necessary and prudent to study thoroughly and completely the type of book classification system the county library should use as it enters the 1970's and a period of burgeoning county library growth. Current elements in the review include our rapidly and necessarily expanding book collection, the beginnings of Twin Cities library cooperation through MELSA, and in view of possible merger, the decision of the Minneapolis Public Library as announced on October 23, 1969 to switch to another classification system on January 1, 1970.

This report by Maurice Freedman, Coordinator of the Technical Processes Department for the Hennepin County Library (and formerly the Administrative Officer and Executive Assistant of the Processing Department of the Library of Congress), was done at my request. Various drafts of the report were reviewed for comment and change by all of the administrative officers of the county library and by some of the other principal staff, with final review by myself.

I now submit this final report with my complete endorsement.

I believe that it is uppermost in our minds that the recommendations contained herein are based (as hopefully are all decisions or recommendations of the county library administration) on the prime considerations of superior public service, effect on public relations, cost effectiveness, and long-range implications.

Since the conclusions reached have great potential impact on future costs, public service, ease of merger with the Minneapolis Public Library and relations with other MELSA libraries, it was felt desirable to document those conclusions as completely as possible. For those of you who find the press of time negates the opportunity to read the complete report, I recommend that you turn to Page 23' for the conclusions and recommendations.

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INTRODUCTION

A classification system performs two primary functions in a library. First, it provides a system of notation which will allow for the storage and retrieval of library materials with some degree of ease and accuracy. Second, it provides for the storage of materials in a systematic manner most usually bringing together in the same place materials on a given subject. For example all books on mathematics would have a single location, and within that location, most classification systems would place the more general math books first, and then arrange after them the several special mathematical topics.

Libraries have always been plagued with classification problems for some very fundamental reasons:

- 1) Man's understanding of the universe is constantly changing. Consequently the neat lines defining subject areas are constantly being blurred, erased or drawn anew. For example, Newton considered the work he did natural philosophy. In terms of today's subject areas, Newton is looked on as one of the great theoretical physicists; most physicists of today would be horrified at being considered natural philosophers. Classification systems, insofar as they can only reflect the organization of man's knowledge at a given time, have a built-in obsolescence and must allow for some change if they are to remain viable. The problem with change is that the price of absolute consistency is extraordinarily high. A library would constantly be revising its classification system, recalling its materials, and revising the notations thereon so that the location of the materials would always reflect man's up-to-date organization of his knowledge of the world.

No one espouses this extreme because of its total impracticality, but finding a reasonable alternative has been and will always be a problem for libraries.

- 2) The development, maintenance and application of a given classification system is a highly complicated and costly enterprise requiring trained professional librarians. Quite simply, the shortage of librarians, particularly of those both interested and experienced in cataloging and classification, and the dearth of funds created by rising costs have created a crisis in today's libraries. Library administrators are consequently seeking approaches that will allow for the maintenance of reasonable classification standards within personnel and cost limitations.

Which leads more directly to what the following paper is about. There are two classification systems prevalently employed by American libraries, as well as many others, each virtually uniquely employed. We will not at all consider the latter because they have no practicality for local public libraries with respect to personnel and cost factors. The two basic systems are the Library of Congress (LC) classification system and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DC) system. Both systems have the following factors in common:

- 1) They are wholly applied, maintained and revised at the Library of Congress by Library of Congress classifiers.
- 2) Most of the cataloging data from the Library of Congress for most materials currently published in the English and Western European languages carries both LC and DC classification numbers. The Library of Congress provides this data on catalog cards it sells, as well as on the MARC tapes it now distributes.

(MARC is the acronym for MAchine Readable Cataloging data. In addition to the catalog cards it has traditionally distributed, the same cataloging data is now placed on reels of magnetic tape and purchased by libraries which have sufficiently computerized to avail themselves of this service.) It is obvious that if the Library of Congress will provide classification numbers for most materials libraries buy, as well as maintain the classification systems, it would be most practical for a given library to adopt either of these two systems, rather than some system which would require it to do everything itself.

- 3) Both systems inadequately represent man's current understanding of the world as exemplified by today's academic disciplines, and consequently each system is undergoing some form of revision. In other words each is imperfect and always will be imperfect.

In terms of differences, the following may be enunciated:

- 1) The LC system is commonly used by research libraries because of its highly elaborated enumeration of topics and because of the large number of materials the Library of Congress collects in non-Western languages. (DC numbers usually are not available for materials in non-Western languages.) The DC system is commonly used by non-research libraries because they generally do not buy books which require the same degree of specificity. The DC system allows for the expansion to any degree of Specificity required, but does not itself- enumerate as many topics as LC.

LC does not allow for the same flexibility in terms of the expansion and diminution of numbers. As will be shown later, there are some large research libraries using DC, others using neither, and some non-research libraries using LC.

- 2) The DC system in its unabridged form is contained in two volumes; one volume being the complete schedule of numbers and the other a complete index to those numbers. The LC system is comprised of 21 separate classification schedules each containing its own index, with no single master index covering all of the schedules. The total number of volumes comprising the LC system is much in excess of 21 because of the various sub-schedules in each of the 21 main areas; e. g., Philosophy and religion are in two separate volumes, both of which comprise Class B. There is only one complete set of LC classification schedules. There are two different DC schedules: the unabridged and the abridged.
- 3) The LC system is constantly having its numbers revised, added to, and deleted. Changes in the DC system occur in five to ten year intervals and all appear at the same time in a wholly new edition of the DC system. All LC changes are listed quarterly, and each of its separate schedules has a unique set of circumstances governing its publication cycle. Consequently some LC schedules are quite up-to-date while others are not. It is obvious that each system implicitly carries certain advantages and disadvantages in its publication cycle.

- 4) Advocates can be found for the superiority -of either system over the other. The position of the Library of Congress as enunciated by the Director of its Processing Department, the executive responsible for both systems, is that each system is viable, each system has its int.1 strengths and weaknesses, and each system should be consistently applied.

All of the above hopefully provides a framework within which the subsequent discussion can be understood. Let us now proceed to what the Hennepin County Library position on a book classification system should be.

THE HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY POSITION ON BOOK CLASSIFICATION

Two factors contribute to the urgency of the need for an articulated position on book classification for the Hennepin County Library (HCL). In 1967, A Plan for the Development of Public Library Service in the Minneapolis - Saint Paul Area was published. Commonly called the MELSA (METropolitan Library Service Area) report, the Plan, in a chapter devoted to technical processing and written by Dr. Wesley Simonton of the University of Minnesota Library School, recommended that the Hennepin County Library and the Minneapolis Public Library (MPL) change to the Library of Congress classification system. With the recent appointment of a director for MELSA, the MELSA report recommendations must be seriously considered at this time.

Secondly, the Minneapolis Public Library, effective January 1, 1970, is classifying its newly acquired materials in accordance with the Library of Congress system. In view of the serious possibility of MPL and HCL merging, it is also most important that the Hennepin County Library have a clearly established position on what classification system it chooses to follow.

The following paper will basically be divided into three parts. First, the Hennepin County Library position will be developed independently of the MELSA recommendation and the MPL change to LC, and then the HCL position will be reviewed in light of these two factors. Final conclusions will be stated in a fourth section.

I. HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY BY ITSELF

Let us begin by examining the HCL in terms of the size and character of its collection, the nature of its patronage, and its plans for growth and development. The Hennepin County Library is a medium-sized library whose largest branch collection at present is around 50, 000 volumes. If it can be considered to have a specialty it would be local and regional materials, but even at that HCL does not attempt to compete with either the state University or city libraries of Minneapolis and St. Paul. By and large the HCL's collection might accurately be described as general, of medium-size and comprised mainly of materials published within the last 10 years. It has no plan to independently become a research library, and its users, although well educated, usually do not now seek the solution of research problems beyond the junior college and sometimes college level at HCL's branches, and probably will not seek them there in the future. It is in view of this description of the Hennepin County Library and some other important factors to be explored below that an attempt will be made to determine the most appropriate classification system for its use.

There are almost endless arguments and counter -arguments espousing the inherent superiority of one system, the inferiority of the other, and vice versa. Simonton in his chapter in - the MELSA report (particularly pages 47 - 49) lists in some detail and quite well the theoretical and practical considerations relating to the adoption of LC and DC. The various arguments supporting each seem most clearly to off set each other on any absolute basis. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, and usefulness and impracticality; and neither can have substantiated

the claim that it is the best for all libraries under all conditions. Thus it is felt that there is no need for a detailed review of these various arguments. (In addition to Simonton's work, the library literature abounds most abundantly and, redundantly with such comparisons.) However, the following general factors of comparison should be made because of their particular relevance to the local situation.

The Library of Congress has as its widest application and was primarily developed for use by very large research libraries. Each of the 21 classes comprising the LC classification schedules were established with the idea that a special library collection would be served by that schedule, and that a particular schedule's design, index, etc. would be tailored to the discipline to which it would be applied.

The Dewey Decimal Classification has its widest application in the public library field, although such large research libraries as the University of Illinois and the University of Minnesota employ it as well. The Decimal Classification is a single comprehensive system with a single index.

A traditionally accepted distinction between the two systems is that the LC class numbers are developed and individually articulated in far greater detail than the Dewey numbers. The Dewey system has within it the capacity for expansion to any given degree of specificity, but the burden for such application most usually rests with the individual classifier.

It would follow from the above that some of the reasons for non-research libraries to choose Dewey would be:

- 1) There is only a single classification schedule with which the classifier has to work, it covers all knowledge, and it has a single comprehensive
- 2) By and large the system is nowhere nearly as cumbersome a tool since it has fewer numbers to pore over, and it is fully contained in 2 volumes (as compared with 25 or more separate volumes comprising the LC schedules).

Other reasons for the prevalence of Dewey in non-research libraries should be:

- 3) It is easier to use for two reasons: Most librarians are required to learn how to use the Dewey classification schedules for their library degree while LC is optional in most schools, particularly local ones. There is only one schedule to learn with Dewey while there are 21 different LC schedules, some of which differ widely in the kinds of tables and subdivisions they employ.
- 4) Most public librarians and public library users have had wide experience with Dewey and little or no exposure to anything else. Schools teach the Dewey classification in their courses on use of libraries; consequently students are familiar with DC from grade school on.

On the basis of the above discussion, assuming HCL's continued independence as a library agency, it would seem unwise for HCL to change from the Dewey system to the LC system:

- 1) All of HCL's users and staff would have to acclimate themselves to a new system.
- 2) All of HCL's catalogers would have to be trained in the use and application of the LC schedules.
- 3) All of the HCL collections would either have to be reclassified, thus paying an enormous price for uniformity and consistency; or if the cost of such a project were to be saved, the ensuing parallel collections would result in continuing confusion and difficulty of use by patrons and staff for a period of ten or more years. The attendant service and public relations problems of the latter alternative would seem difficult to justify.
- 4) The variety and specificity of LC class numbers would frequently tend to separate subject material for which no such separation would be needed or required by HCL.
- 5) The Library of Congress is continuing to provide DC numbers, as well as LC numbers, on a comprehensive basis for the materials acquired by HCL on LC catalog cards, in LC book catalogs (printed compilations of LC cards) and on the MARC tapes.
- 6) The usual problems involved in the use of the Dewey classification system are manageable in terms of the staff and resources of the Hennepin County Library now and in the foreseeable future. The problems of parallel operations and changeover techniques, combined with the usual problems involved in using LC once it is established,

seem less attractive, more problematic and less justifiable than the continuation of our present course of using the 17th edition of the Dewey Decimal Classification.

II. THE MPL CHANGE TO LC

Since HCL wishes to gain the fullest benefits from cooperative efforts, its position on classification should be considered in light of the MPL's published reasons for changing to LC and the MELSA recommendation on LC. A determination must be made as to the nature of HCL's position on classification in relation to these cooperative ventures.

The Minneapolis Public Library Official Bulletin dated October 23, 1969 stated the following justification for changing to the LC classification system:

"We ask you to understand that we are looking beyond the immediate difficulties to the long-range benefits that will accrue to the Library (MPL) in cost reduction, in faster processing, and in establishing linkages with other libraries through the MARC system." (p. 1)

First the validity of the announced reasons for the MPL change to the LC classification System will be examined.

- 1) “. . . long-range benefits that will accrue to the Library in cost reduction.” No attempt will be made -to get into the minutiae of cost comparisons between LC and Dewey. Fundamentally, a basic, but limited, saving does exist in accepting LC over Dewey insofar as the Library of Congress provides Cutter numbers with their LC classification numbers. (Note: The Cutter or author number specifically and uniquely identifies a given book; a classification number by itself brings together books on the. same subject but provides no means of uniquely distinguishing materials on the same given subject from each other.) The Dewey classification numbers on LC

cards do not include Cutter numbers the simple reason that the Library of Congress uses the LC system for its own books and would thus require Cutter numbers for uniquely identifying its own materials. Since the application of Cutter numbers is primarily clerical and not a professional task, this single saving in itself would not seem adequate to justify a change to LC. The following additional factors should be considered which enter into the problem of the use of LC and supposed cost factors:

- a) The dearth of catalogers capable of using LC. The local library schools do not require training in LC cataloging, They all must learn Dewey.
- b) The amount of time required to maintain and use the LC in classification schedules is quite significant. If original cataloging is to be consistent with current LC classification practice, the updating of superseded schedules and the lack of a comprehensive index would normally increase the per unit time of original classification with LC. Without such costly maintenance it is virtually impossible to account for apparent discrepancies between newly published LC class numbers and the numbers appearing in the outdated classification schedules.

Before granting that long-range cost reductions will accrue from a changeover to LC, it would be necessary to evaluate the specific savings

which are claimed but not listed in the Official Bulletin. Any such savings also should include an analysis of concomitant service problems.

- 2) "... in faster processing..." The discussion above applies equally to this claim. It might be added that the bulk of processing time is effected not by the class number, be it LC or Dewey, but by description, subject analysis, the creation of a permanent physical record for the book, and the preparation of the book for use. Certainly there is little other than the "givenness" of the aforementioned Cutter number which would result prima facie in speedier processing. In addition to cost reductions, the specific increases in production speed would have to be demonstrated.
- 3) "...and in establishing linkages with other libraries through the -'V;.ARC system...." This justification is without foundation both from the standpoint of current practice and reasonable projections for the future. The basis for this assertion can be summarized by the following statements:
 - a) There are a variety of classification systems in existence, and an inordinate number of variations in local practice. The three largest libraries in the United States each use different classification systems: the Library of Congress, the Harvard University Library and the New York Public Library Reference Department (its Circulation Department is on Dewey which means it actually has two systems.)

Because of these differences, linkages could hardly be established between them, by MARC or any other system on the basis of the LC classification number.

- b) The Library of Congress classification number is not at all Prevalent as a communication link. Generally Classification numbers are not used for this purpose. Where they are used for the purpose of organizing or disseminating bodies of information, Dewey seems to prevail. E. g., New Serial Titles a publication of the Library of Congress's Serial Record Division listing all newly published magazines; the American Book Publishers Record a listing of all new trade publications; and -the British National Bibliography a listing of all now British publications are all arranged by numbers taken from the 17th edition of the Dewey Decimal Classification.
- c) Inter-library loan (ILL), one of the oldest forms of library cooperation and library "network" activity, is based on a complete bibliographical citation. The least important element, if of any value at all, would be the LC (or Dewey) call number because classification changes are so frequent and local variations are so abundant. The foremost national tool for ILL is the National Union Catalog (maintained and published by the Library of Congress), an author rather than classed arrangement. It contains tens of thousands of entries each year bearing no classification number at all.

d) Existing networks utilizing MARC have linkages established through LC card number not LC classification numbers because of the different systems used and the variations in local usage and requirements. (Note: The LC card number is the control number which identifies the bibliographical record contained both on the LC catalog card and the MARC tape record; the catalog record, in addition to the descriptive and subject data, includes the LC call number¹ and the DC number if assigned. The card number then has no bibliographical significance, but is the only easy way libraries using a variety of classification systems can briefly and precisely refer to a given catalog record.) The call number and all of the other bibliographical elements are subject to change and frequently do, but the LC card number virtually remains the same, (Analogy: One undergoes many changes in one's lifetime, but one's social security number remains the same). It is most probable that future linkages through MARC will continue to be through the LC card number, and possibly the Standard Book Number, not the LC call number, (Note: The Standard Book Number (SBN) is the number being used by the book trade to identify publications and control book stocks.)

¹ For our purposes, the call number is the entire number used to uniquely identify a book, and is comprised of both a classification number and a Cutter number

- e) The weekly index which LC sends out with the MARC records is arranged by LC card number,
- f) in terms of communication between libraries be it via manual or automated devices, the greatest accuracy is with the full bibliographic citation. When numbers are used as substitutes, they are "register" type numbers such as the LC card number, the Standard Book Number or as in the case of national bibliographies, the national bibliography number - again, not the LC call number.

Thus, as demonstrated above, communication by LC call number with other libraries through MARC or any other medium would not seem to be at all practical on any non-local basis. Which brings up the point, since MPL cannot communicate nationally by LC call number, with whom would MPL communicate locally? With the exception of the St. Paul Public Library (SPPL), it has no other public library with which to communicate. It should also be noted that the St. Paul Public Library did not consistently use the LC call numbers provided by LC from the time it adopted LC in 1917 (when its entire central collection had been destroyed by fire); at present SPPL is attempting to bring whole sections of its collections into uniformity with LC.

All of the public libraries in the MELSA area, except for the St. Paul Public Library, plus the overwhelming majority of the public population are using and are accustomed to some version of Dewey. Added to this is the fact that the University of Minnesota Library employs its own adapted version of Dewey. So MPL's

decisions to go to LC benefits the 132, 000 registered borrowers of St. Paul (MELSA report, p. 79) but the 521, 000+ other registered borrowers in the Twin Cities area will, when using the MPL's facilities, be forced to learn a totally new system. They will undoubtedly experience great confusion, and most probably encounter complications; i. e., problems will arise in maintaining the separate but related Dewey and LC collections which must necessarily complicate service. Thus MPL will partially increase its facility of communication with the St. Paul Public Library and St. Paul's residents at the expense of its own citizens' and all other Twin Cities residents' ability to communicate with MPL. (It should also be noted that the St. Paul Public Library collection of 700,000 volumes and its very limited book budget of less than \$200,000 will be surpassed in collection size by the HCL in the next two years and the gap will grow substantially larger each year.) This point leads to a discussion of the MELSA recommendation of the LC classification for centralized processing by MPL, HCL and SPPL.

III. THE MELSA REPORT RECOMMENDATION

In marked contrast to Wesley Simonton's detailed and reasoned exposition of theoretical and theoretical considerations relating to the LC and Dewey classification systems, and the history and practice regarding classification in these three public library systems, his recommendation that HCL and MPL change to LC completely omitted any reasons why LC rather than Dewey should be the single classification system chosen for a processing center. As stated earlier the various considerations with respect to each system appeared to be off setting and did not logically yield any inescapable conclusions for HCL and IMPI, in relation to the adoption of LC. In a matter with such wide reaching implications on cost and service as the choice of one classification to the exclusion of all others, the analysis supporting the particular system should have been included. Following in its entirety is Dr. Simonton's summary and recommendation regarding classification (MELSA report, p. 52):

“Reclassification of a large library is not a simple or inexpensive matter and acceptance of a single classification system by all libraries is not a necessary condition for the establishment of a processing center or the production of a book catalog. However, processing costs will be lower if a single system is used and, perhaps even more important, the effectiveness of the classified section of the book catalog will be much greater if resources are displayed in a single rather than a two-part file. It is therefore recommended that the processing center adopt the Library of Congress Classification for

all materials processed and that Minneapolis and Hennepin County review their collections to identify those reference works and other items of current and lasting value which should be reclassified. Complete reclassification of the collections is not necessary.”

The fundamental problems with this recommendation are: it implies a conception of centralized processing as an end in itself, and has extremely undesirable implications from the twin standpoints of the use and administration of converted libraries. Centralized processing with one classification system in an ideal world might be the best possible approach. Since this is not an ideal world, what is the existing situation? In the Twin Cities area where more than 80% of the Population has been served by public libraries on DC, almost all of the librarians are trained in Dewey, and approximately 75% of the total volumes held by MELSA libraries are classed with Decimal Classification numbers. It would seem that if a single system were to be used, it would be the Dewey Decimal Classification system rather than LC. However, no Procrustean bed of Dewey is suggested for the LC classified St. Paul Public Library, but at the same the seemingly implicit notion that all of the other MELSA libraries be forced into the LC mold is wholly rejected. (In addition, but with less significance, present and future relations with the University library and its community would be better served by a common classification system.)

For the unusual variety of classification systems which exist for the three largest public libraries in the Twin Cities, the practical, not the ideal, must be considered and a most heavy value should be placed on service and meeting individual local needs. There is no question that classification variations in a processing

center are feasible. For example, in the publication California State Library: Processing Center Design and Specifications, the recommended statewide processing center "... (attempts) to preserve, where it is technically feasible, significant variations in local cataloging practice and notation. This is embodied in (the) file structure design in which there is not only a central bibliographic file out also a holdings file which will record local variations in call number, location and subject/descriptive cataloging." (v. 1, p. 5) It is assumed that an attempt will be made to minimize differences, but certainly not to the extent which would have such drastic ramifications as the MELSA recommendation.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

- 1) The two basic problems which prohibit the recommendation of a change to LC for the Hennepin County Library, and which raise the most serious questions regarding the wisdom of the Minneapolis Public Library's decision to change to LC, are the temporary inconvenience to patrons in having to learn a new system (5 to 10 years?) and the permanent inconvenience of having to look in at least two different places for books on the same subject. (Note: Books on a given subject may already be in more than one place because of existing shortcomings inherent in each classification system and probably in the nature of all classification systems.)
- 2) Which leads to the two most fundamental points about library classification systems: any intelligently designed system may be workable for a library so long as the library remains consistent in developing and applying it to its collections, and no classification system can be perfect. The overwhelming predominance of LC and Dewey in United States libraries with respect to any other systems is accounted for by the Library of Congress's program of providing both of these kinds of class numbers on its catalog cards, in its book catalogs, and on the MARC tapes. This predominance is a result of the Library of Congress doing most of the work, not because these are the two most perfect systems. And because the Library of Congress provides these numbers, there are large savings of time, money and personnel in the classification of libraries by those libraries which use the numbers provided.

Thus the only condition which should prompt a serious consideration of change for the Hennepin County Library from DC would be the discontinuance by the Library of Congress of its policy of providing Dewey numbers for current language publications.

- 3) As to the MPL decision to change to LC, its advisability should be most seriously questioned because its published reasons for the change do not seem to provide adequate justification. The time and cost savings seem to require further evidence, and the concept of linkages through MARC tapes as a justification for switching to LC is wholly fallacious. Certainly HCL should not go to LC on this basis.
- 4) As to the MELSA report, the Hennepin County Library should not support its recommendation for the adoption of a single classification system for these basic reasons:
 - a) Little, if any, justification is offered for the recommendation in the report.
 - b) No cost savings from a processing center wholly on LC are envisioned or offered which could justify the resultant conversion costs and/or lowered grade of service to HCL patrons, and the patrons of all other Dewey-classed libraries in the area,
- 5) It is recommended that the Hennepin County Library's only reasonable course is to continue using the Dewey Decimal Classification, and to use it in a consistent fashion. Quality of service at a reasonable cost should always be the Hennepin County Library's goal. This goal will not be met if this recommendation is not be met if this recommendation is not followed.