

Assignment 2

Library of Congress Subject Headings

I found this assignment very difficult, partially in subject analysis but also simply in finding subject headings that matched the subject I wanted to describe. I spent several hours banging my head against the wall, and the most help I got was from various of my colleagues in the class, who offered their own perspectives on what the document was about and where to look in the headings lists.

The first thing I did was to attempt a subject analysis. This was hard for several reasons. First of all, I know little or nothing about the topic, at least using the terminology on the title page and in the table of contents, and as little about most of the disciplines represented by the authors. Therefore I had no subject knowledge or context that I could draw on. Secondly, I had only the title page and table of contents from the book for which I was supposed to assign subject headings. Not only could I not read the full book, I couldn't even flip through the pages to gather a feel for the articles, extending beyond their mere titles. I performed a simple linguistic vocabulary analysis, underlining the words that appeared at least twice, and looked them up in LCSH (first using the 1999 22nd edition, hardbound).

I really wanted to find something like "virtual communities" or some related term, because the table of contents kept referring to "virtual spaces" and related terms that involved translating real-world concepts or objects into a digital setting. Unfortunately, that tactic turned up nothing. Dead end. There is nothing "virtual" in LCSH. I tried some more headings, following from "Community" and leading through "Communication," "Digital communications," "Information technology," "Information theory," and "Communication models," most of which were either too centered on the technological aspects (rather than the social) or simply inaccurate. Obviously this tactic hadn't gotten me very far.

At this point Pete Adelman and I were poking through LCSH together, and he suggested topics like "Mass media," which I didn't like because it made me think of things like movies and television, which didn't seem relevant to me. I did find a subject heading called "Mass media and technology" and jotted it down for further consideration.

It picked up both the “media” and the “technology” keywords in the subtitle, but I wasn’t sure whether “mass media” was the kind of “media” we wanted.

I went back to my table of contents and forced myself to formulate a subject in English words: “Human interactions translated into an online environment.” Unfortunately, LCSH doesn’t use any of those terms, and I was really at a loss as to how to describe this subject with LCSH. I started thinking that it really must not exist at all. I found subjects like “Human-computer interaction,” which sounded relevant (interactions of humans with computers!) but is, again, referring to the technological aspects. “World Wide Web” and “Internet” are applicable but very non-specific. What *about* the WWW and the Internet? Also, there are so many thousands of books on those two topics that browsing the list of titles with those subject headings will hardly facilitate locating this book in the melée.

While browsing through the subject headings under either “World Wide Web” or “Internet,” I stumbled upon a cross-reference to “Electronic villages (Computer networks),” which was kind of what I had been aiming for in my search for online communities and virtual spaces, but I decided that it wasn’t really relevant after all. Although one of the article titles mentioned “virtual communities,” and some others seemed to refer to the same concept, I decided that it was too narrow to describe the collection as a whole.

At about this point I switched to the online Classification Web in the hope that it would have a few updated headings, but I was frustrated and almost ready to pick a few headings more or less at random and go with it. What I wanted just didn’t seem to exist. Luckily, Lisa Mendez passed through the hall outside 420 on her way to the GA room, and I asked her for hints. She suggested I look at “Convergence,” which was a surprise since it hadn’t even occurred to me that this was a term that was specific enough to use in a subject heading. It turns out that “Convergence (Telecommunications)” is a valid subject heading and that the books connected to it in the Library of Congress Catalog have very similar titles to the one in our assignment. Paydirt!

The last breakthrough came from Noella, who reminded me that “—Social aspects” is a free-floating subdivision that can be used for pretty much everything. I decided to tack it onto “World Wide Web” and “Internet,” and upon checking those

headings in the LC catalog to see what other works they'd been used for, they seemed very applicable. (I feel like I should elaborate on this decision, but I don't know what more I can say that's not completely obvious. The collection is about the social aspects of WWW and Internet technology. Duh.) I also checked on my tentative heading, "Mass media and technology," and decided that although some of the books listed under that heading were slightly unrelated, others were very similar to the assigned work and used the same kind of terminology.

The last thing I did was to arrange my headings in order of applicability or of importance, something like that, and ended up with this list:

<p>Convergence (Telecommunication) Mass media and technology World Wide Web—Social aspects Internet—Social aspects</p>
--

Now, I probably shouldn't be quite so honest about the help that I got from my fellow students, but I want to give them credit. I don't think I would have made it through this assignment if it weren't for them. On the one hand, it would have been so easy if I'd just tried looking up all the words that are in the document itself, or at least the title, but the fact is that I didn't. I knew as much about the book's contents as I could without reading it and without being a subject expert, but I think the fact of putting the subject in my own words is what did me in. The words I used aren't the ones that LCSH uses. This seems like a systematic problem of LCSH for me; it never seems to use the same words that I do. Maybe I should take this as a hint that I'm not meant to be a cataloger...

The major problem I had was simply finding the right headings. Once I found them, though, there was a sort of internal "ding!" and I knew I'd found the right one.