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Enriching the Vocabulary of Law

New legal subject headings

By Suzanne R. Graham and George Prager

Here's a fun little quiz:

- 1 Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are more than 100 years old. TRUE or FALSE?
- 2 Every needed law-related heading has already been added. TRUE or FALSE?
- 3 Keyword searching makes subject headings obsolete. TRUE or FALSE?
- 4 Only catalogers may develop new subject headings. TRUE or FALSE?

1 TRUE. The LCSH controlled vocabulary turned 114 years old this year, and it continues to grow and evolve in size and functionality. Printed volumes of LCSH expanded from 1,088 pages in its first edition (published in 1909-1914) to 9,153 pages in the 33rd edition (published in 2011). Our interaction with the vocabulary has undergone dramatic transformation. Libraries no longer routinely provide the hefty red volumes for patron perusal or staff reference. Our next generation catalogs push these terms out to users as facets, clusters, and in tag clouds, and even our more traditional online catalogs hyperlink the subject headings, making it easy to find the proper phrasing and retrieve relevant titles with a click. In addition, law librarians can access the most up-to-date version of LCSH online through a variety of subscription-based and free sources, such as Classification Web, Library of Congress' authority file (authorities.loc.gov), and the Semantic Web-friendly linked data service (id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects.html). The major bibliographic databases, OCLC and SkyRiver, automatically run queries against the LCSH authority files during the heading validation process.

2 FALSE. However, each year librarians have proposed only a few new subject headings for law-related topics. Either legal scholarship is stagnating, or the law library community needs to do more to capture and propose headings for emerging concepts.

3 FALSE. Subject headings still have a place in a keyword world. Keywords enable users to find *some* things, but when they need the nexus of precision and recall, they need subject headings. Even if users do not know the correct heading at the start of the search, they can find a relevant hit to zero in on the subjects assigned and refine the initial query.

4 FALSE. Explaining why this statement is false is the crux of this article. Since catalogers are not the only people who use subject headings, it would be counterproductive if no one else had an avenue to recommend a change or addition. In fact, almost anyone may assist in the process. Crafting a proposal requires some time and effort, but it is not an elite art or science. In the first six months of 2012, the Library of Congress Policy Standards Division approved more than 1,900 new terms—an average of 320 successful new proposals every month.



Subject Heading Basics

The subject heading proposal process divides into three parts: justifying the heading sufficiently, constructing the heading and references correctly, and coding the record fields properly. Catalogers speak of literary warrant as the source of heading justification. The basic guidance in the *Subject Headings Manual* is to recommend a heading “when it is first encountered in a work being cataloged” (H187). As soon as the first treatise, thesis, or government document arrives at a library, the librarian should *consider* making a proposal but maybe not *make* the proposal. A prospective heading requires validation in either general knowledge or specialized encyclopedias, dictionaries, or other notable reference tools. If the concept has not been mentioned anywhere else in the existing scholarly discourse, its time likely has not yet come.

Getting the proper form of the heading and references also involves research into the subject-specific literature, but the terminology used by the experts in the discipline may need to be adjusted to take into account the precedents and patterns for headings in LCSH. These patterns need to be respected to enhance the logical integrity and predictability of the vocabulary. For example, when one bandies about “civil rights demonstrations” versus “demonstrations, civil rights,” the best place to start is how LCSH construes headings for other kinds of demonstrations.

The MACHine Readable Cataloging (MARC) coding requirements are likely the most foreign part of the proposal process to the noncataloger, but they are the least ambiguous phase of the process. Clear guidance dictates whether a heading is a 600 (personal name) or 650 (topical heading), for example, and the indicators and subfields have defined meanings. While the other two parts require big-picture views, this final part demands careful attention to details.

SACO Law Funnel

Librarians lacking expertise or comfort with drafting heading proposals can tap into the experience and talents of colleagues from across the country through one of the 13 Subject Authority Cooperative (SACO) funnel projects (www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/funnelsaco.html). The funnels serve a variety of communities and offer a helping hand in preparing and submitting proposals.

The SACO Law Funnel began in 2011. Any member of AALL may submit a heading to the funnel through an online form available on the Technical Services Special Interest Section's homepage (www.aallnet.org/sis/tssis/sacolawfunnel). The goal of the funnel is to encourage submissions of subject headings for legal topics and, ultimately, to get as many subject headings added to LCSH as needed.

The Law Funnel encourages submissions at any state of completion to start the dialogue. All that is truly required is the heading idea and a reason why it is needed. The funnel administrators will refine and carry the idea through to formal submission to the Library of Congress or will explain their

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reasons for not submitting directly

with the proposer.

The first step in the review process done by the funnel coordinating committee is to research the viability of the term proposed. The proposal then receives wider blind-review by a panel of experienced law catalogers for additional input and refinement. Once the concept is vetted by the catalogers most likely to assign it, the focus shifts to the technical aspects of the submission: making or reviewing decisions about the MARC encoding of authority fields and subfields.

The whole process for the proposer is relatively painless and quick. Although submission through the funnel does not guarantee a proposal's acceptance into LCSH, it does benefit from intermediary consideration and discussion.

Get involved

Computer automation has changed the way librarians and patrons tap into the LCSH headings, but human assessment is still the heart of their identification and creation. Our subject headings remain a powerful part of our catalog searches, and all law librarians should feel empowered to help maintain LCSH, regardless of their level of training and experience. The volunteers of the SACO Law Funnel stand ready to help develop new heading proposals. Next time you perceive a gap in the headings, do yourself and the law community a favor and consider sending a proposal to the funnel. ■

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