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The Cataloguing and Treatment of American Comic Strips from the early to mid-twentieth Century in the Classification Schemas of BISAC, Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress.

Introduction

The comic strip is an American innovation that uniquely combines entertainment and art in a format that has been capturing the interest and imaginations of the reading public, in America and across the world, for over a century. From its inception in 1896, with the premiere of Richard Outcault's comedic *The Yellow Kid* (acknowledged as the first comic strip) in the *New York Journal*, the comic strip became immediately popular with the general populace, albeit derided by cultural/academic critics and institutions as a lesser, ephemeral form of entertainment with no redeeming value (Blackbeard 1987, 12-15).

Upon examining these opposing views and the resultant influence on the practice followed by libraries in categorizing and organizing comic strips, I will compare three cataloguing systems: Book Industry Standards and Communications Classification (BISAC); Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC); Library of Congress Classification (LCC). In this process, I will examine and explore how the opinions toward comic strips have shifted in the Information Sciences and whether this reflects in these classification systems.

### *Background on the Golden Age of the Comic Strip*

From the 1910s and onward, the reputation of comic strips slowly began to improve as the scope, content, and quality of the American comic strip matured beyond simple gags and humor into more sophisticated genres and themes such as adventure, action, mystery, and romance (Ellis and Highsmith 2000, 26). These innovations and improvements in graphic narrative eventually led into the Golden Age of American newspaper comic strips. During this progressive era, numerous comic strips were created which brilliantly combined sharp dialogue and magnificent artwork, thus becoming ingrained into the social fabric of life. Strips such as *Krazy Kat*, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *Bringing Up Father*, *Flash Gordon*, *Li'l Abner*, *Pogo*, and *Peanuts* are but a few examples of the gems created during this time which highlight the brilliance of the art form (Inge 2014).

In this time frame, comic strips served to mirror the American psyche, exposing the mores and neuroses of a modern society striving to reconcile its idealized agrarian past within an increasingly industrialized landscape. Members of academic and cultural institutions began to express their admiration for the comic strip, although most members of the middle and upper classes were incensed and viewed these publications which were originally published in populist newspapers -- which had a reputation for low-brow "muckraking" -- with disdain. Even though most of the more popular comic strips were published in these controversial tabloids, it is possible that libraries had subscribed to and saved back issues of these newspapers. However, it would have been difficult for the average patron to have access to these comic strips in the likelihood that some librarians may have removed them from saved back issues or that back issues would have been stored in backrooms or isolated storage areas.

With the advent of paperback books, the newspaper syndicates which owned comic strips could now republish collections of individual strips or entire storylines into a condensed edited format. More popular strips such as *Li'l Abner* and *Pogo* were often collected and republished in paperback book format by publishers, although most libraries would have been unlikely to acquire such books for their collection. In the last 20 years, the comic strip and its relative, the comic book, have begun to receive widespread attention and focus from institutions of "High Culture" such as universities and libraries. At long last, libraries are beginning to embrace and promote the comic strip and other graphic narratives as an important and viable form of art and literature. This has coincided with attempts by publishers such as Fantagraphics and IDW to republish the complete runs of comic strips utilizing their original specifications in a durable hardcover format, making the classic comic strips of the Golden Age more accessible to libraries than ever before.

### Classification Schemes

#### *BISAC*

Originally developed by the Book Industry Study Group (BISG), BISAC is utilized by major booksellers such as Barnes & Noble and Amazon to organize and classify their inventory by Subject Headings based on common terms (Glushko 2013, 293). There are 51 subject categories in BISAC, each with a number of subdivisions. Because it uses general subject headings and a classification scheme that encourages users to browse the shelves, some libraries utilize BISAC as an alternative to DDC and LCC. However, compared to LCC or DDC, there are less specializations or subcategories to define specific Subject Headings for objects. This is especially difficult for purposes of distinguishing collected editions of comic strips by genre, individual character(s), year, and etc.

As such, BISAC allows for basic categorization of comic strips into one of the two following categories (“BISAC Subject Headings List, Humor | BISG” 2015; “BISAC Subject Headings List, Comics and Graphic Novels | BISG” 2015):

CGN001000 COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS / Anthologies

COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS / Comics & Cartoons see HUMOR / Form / Comic Strips & Cartoons

HUM001000 HUMOR / Form / Comic Strips & Cartoons

In its current state, BISAC is not a suitable cataloguing system for comic strips. While the first subject heading allows for some broad interpretation of classifying comic strips, it is too open-ended as to how and where comic strips are to be shelved. Conversely, the second Subject Heading classifies comic strips as being “Humor” which glosses over the multitude of genres those comic strips encompass.

### *Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)*

The quintessential classification system created by Melvil Dewey in 1876 to serve as a universal classification system for all printed material is currently licensed and distributed by Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). DDC utilizes a set of 10 basic tables that represent the broadest subject categories, each table containing 10 subtopics that deal with more specific topics, and this process is repeated ad infinitum until all specific qualities of a subject are addressed (OCLC 2015).

Since we start with the most basic Subject Heading, we should begin at 700 Arts & recreation, which will then break down into (“741.5 - WebDewey” 2015):

740

Graphic arts & decorative arts

741

Drawing and drawings

741.5-741.7

Special applications

741.5

Comic books, graphic novels, fotonovelas, cartoons, caricatures, comic strips

This can be further subdivided into:

741.56 – Cartoons, caricatures, comic strips

741.569

History, geographic treatment, biography of cartoons, caricatures, comic strips [formerly 741.509]

According to WebDewey, 741.569 can be further subdivided by geography by adding notations from T2—3—T2—9 to 741.569, which results in (“741.5 vs. 741.56 - WebDewey” 2015):

741.5691

Treatment by areas, regions, places in general

741.5693-741.5699

Specific continents, countries, localities

The MARC21 fields in DDC are also useful for cataloguing additional information that helps link one record to related records for writer(s), artist(s), characters, publisher, age rating and etc. (W. T. B. Fee 2013). This is seen in the example below, the MARC record for a reprint

of *Li'l Abner* daily and Sunday strips that is part of a reprint series by the publisher IDW

(“MARC21 View of Li'l Abner Volume 1” 2015):

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LEADER 00000cam 2200000Ia 4500
001 430840849
003 OCoLC
005 20100721114245.0
008 090813s2010 caua 6 000 0 eng d
020 9781600106118
020 1600106110
035 (OCoLC)430840849
040 BTCTA|cBTCTA|dHCO|dOSU|dCPL
049 CPLL
050 4 PN6728.L5|bc27 2010x
082 04 741.5973|222
100 1 Capp, Al,|d1909-1979.
240 10 Li'l Abner.|kSelections
245 10 Al Capp's Li'l Abner :|bcomplete daily & Sunday comics
1934-1936 /|c[edited and designed by Dean Mullaney ;
associate editor, Bruce Canwell ; contributing editor,
Denis Kitchen].
246 1 |iSubtitle on jacket cover:|aComplete dailies & color
Sundays.|nVolume one, 1934-1936
246 18 Li'l Abner.|nVolume 1, 1934-1936
246 30 Li'l Abner :|bcomplete daily & Sunday comics, 1934-1936
260 San Diego :|bIDW Pub.,|cc2010.
300 269 p. :|bill. (some col.) ;|c32 cm.
490 1 Library of American comics
500 "Nearly 800 sequential comics from the very beginning,
1934-1936"--Jacket.
650 0 Li'l Abner (Fictitious character)|vComic books, strips,
etc.
650 0 Mountain people|vComic books, strips, etc.
650 0 American wit and humor, Pictorial.
655 0 Comic books, strips, etc.
700 1 Mullaney, Dean,|d1954-
700 1 Canwell, Bruce.
700 1 Kitchen, Denis,|d1946-
830 0 Library of American comics.
994 C0|bcPL
997 xacmh
997 xajeh

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Because of the level of specificity that DDC allows, as well as the linear approach it takes, going from most general to most specific, it would seem that DDC is an excellent classification system for classifying comic strips. However, while DDC allows for geographical

subdivisions in comic strips and graphic narratives, this feature of DDC is not often utilized by librarians, nor does DDC allow for subdivisions by era/year for comic strips.

### *Library of Congress Classification (LCC)*

The Library of Congress classification scheme was developed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by Charles Putnam, the 8<sup>th</sup> Librarian of Congress, to classify the holdings of the Library of Congress. It has been widely adopted by many libraries, in particular academic and public libraries, to catalogue and organize their collections. The LCC organizes subjects into 21 classes, which in turn have numerous subdivisions that allow for specification by geography, time, and type of publication (“Library of Congress Classification” 2015).

The Library of Congress is home to one of the larger collections of graphic narrative materials, including comic strips. The collection is handled by the Serial and Government Publications Division and, as of 2011, contains 7,700 titles from a number of diverse publishers (Weber 2011).

In Library of Congress Classification, comic strips are classified in two Classes, P and N.

Under Class P – Language and Literature, Subclass PN Literature (General)

This is the general Class Number and Subject Heading that comic strips are listed under in Class P (Congress 2015a):

PN6700-6790      Comic books, strips, etc.

Works created in the United States are classified under the more specific Subject Heading of Comic books, strips, etc. -- United States, with class numbers PN6725-6728.

Tree hierarchy view:

Collections of general literature

Comic books, strips, etc.

By region or country

United States

Classification Web also lists two alternatives toward a detailed division for American comic strips by further subdividing by Individual authors or by Individual comic strips (Congress 2015b; Congress 2015c):

PN6727.A-Z Individual authors or works, A-Z

Collections of general literature

Comic books, strips, etc.

By region or country

United States

Individual authors or works, A-Z

PN6728.A-Z Individual comic strips. By title, A-Z

Collections of general literature

Comic books, strips, etc.

By region or country

United States

Individual comic strips. By title, A-Z

Comic strips can also be classified under (Congress 2015d):

Class N – Fine Arts – Subclass NC

NC1300-1766 Pictorial humor, caricature, etc

Drawing. Design. Illustration

Caricature. Pictorial humor and satire



Comic books, strips, etc.

### Discussion on LCC

Compared to DDC and BISAC, Library of Congress Classification allows for the most flexibility and detail in cataloguing collected comic strips (O'English, Matthews, and Lindsay 2006, 176). LCC possesses its own classification category for comic strips, as well as subdivisions for geography/nation of origin. Unfortunately, LCC Subject Headings do not have specifications for dividing comic strips by genre or by period/era as it does for fiction categories such as for PS530-536.3:

American literature

    Collections of American literature

        By period

While this is generally not a problem for most library users, most comic strip aficionados and academic researchers of American popular culture would prefer to have a classification that allows for such precise division.

In response to this problem, alternatives or complementary strategies to LCC are required to make it more usable. For instance, social tagging to improve catalog searches has been shown to help users improve accessibility to graphic novels and collections of comic strips (West 2013, 306-307). Academic institutions that have possess large collections of comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels often utilize their own adapted versions of the LCC. For instance, Michigan State University utilizes and adapted the LCC to account for the decade that a title was first published and a subdivision for publisher by Cutter number (Fee 2008, 188).

Even though the LCC system has been criticized for being too Amerocentric and antiquated in its Subject Headings, for the purposes of cataloguing comic strips from the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this is no problem as comic strips in these categories are mostly in line with the view expressed through the LCC SH.

### Conclusion

While the comic strip and graphic based narratives have gained more widespread acceptance across the board in American society (Gavigan 2013), American libraries that are invested in providing their patrons access to graphic narratives need to improve on how these materials are classified and catalogued in their collections (Wagner 2010, 47). Just as there are allowances for specific divisions for genre(s), style(s), era(s), and so on in fiction, LCC needs to allow for a similar level of specification in the equally diverse field of comic strips.

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