

## Classificationist as author: the case of the Prelinger Library

Melanie Feinberg

According to standard methods, the task of designing an organizational system, be it a classification, controlled vocabulary, or metadata schema, should be approached with detachment and objectivity. Even as classification researchers acknowledge, as does Clare Beghtol (2001), that “every classification is a theoretical construct imposed on ‘reality,’” the classificationist is still seen as someone who compiles, or documents, the perspective of a defined group or groups (perhaps that of a particular discourse community, organization, or other set of users). This standpoint is sensible when considering professionally developed classifications created to facilitate the retrieval of documents for some defined public. It would not be useful, in such a scenario, for a classification to exhibit the personal, original perspective of its creator.

The Prelinger Library in San Francisco provides a counter-example to the idea of classification as documentation. While the Prelinger Library provides public access to its materials, it does not operate under a retrieval orientation. (Megan Shaw Prelinger describes the library as being intentionally “browsing-based” rather than “query-based,” to “[open] wide the possibility of discovery.”) In this paper, I explore how, in violating standard classification design goals of neutrality and predictability, the Prelinger Library’s classification system shows an authorial voice. This voice, in turn, facilitates a rhetorical purpose for the classification.

For the Prelinger Library, authorial voice as represented in the classification system is tightly integrated with the unique contents of the collection. This again goes against professional practice, as selection of resources is typically regarded as a separate task from their representation. While the Prelinger Library comprises a discrete set of physical resources housed in a particular location, this design strategy is also apparent in a common feature of social classification systems: the public sharing of personal resource collections. The paper concludes by suggesting that authorial voice, as expressed through the combination of selection, description, and arrangement, might be a useful construct in both understanding such shared collections and in supporting their development.

### *Classificationist as careful compiler: the traditional view*

Neutrality has been a persistent goal in classification design. The necessity of neutrality in nomenclature is Sayers’s tenth “canon,” or postulate, for classification design (Sayers, 1915). “The introduction of any name which exhibits a critical view of the subject it connotes is a violation of one of the first principles of classification,” Sayers admonishes (Sayers, 1915, p. 32). While scholars have debated at length the scope of what might be accurately documented (the whole of knowledge, a single subject field, the multiple perspectives that constitute a particular discourse community), the sense of the classificationist as someone who uncovers an existing order, as opposed to creating a new order, seems fairly consistent. Ranganathan’s canon of helpful sequence, for example, seems to function as a logical ideal, a form of external reality that the classificationist should attempt to isolate, and that the classification should faithfully reflect; there *is* a most helpful sequence, and Ranganathan’s set of canons, postulates, and so on, enables its attainment (Ranganathan, 1959). Similarly, in contending that classifications should “adapt . . . to the existing structure of thought,” Shera makes the identification and representation of this structure the classificationist’s goal (Shera, 1966, p. 84). Shera’s “existing structure of thought” seems similar to Beghtol’s description of “cultural warrant,” a term that she uses to encapsulate the changing meanings of literary, scientific/philosophical, and educational warrant over time (Beghtol, 1986). If neutrality is attained and the chosen scope well documented, then the classification should be predictable for the selected user group, and thus useful in a retrieval

context. It is precisely the failure of classifications such as the Dewey Decimal Classification and Soviet library classification to achieve these goals that motivates Clay Shirky's attack on all forms of "ontology" as "overrated" (Shirky, 2005).

*The Prelinger Library: an authorial voice*

The Prelinger Library is a non-circulating private institution, with a collection of 50,000 items. The items are not catalogued, but they are arranged in a progressive order from one end of the library to the other, and different sections of the shelves are physically marked with headings. In contrast to the standard design goals of neutrality and predictability, the Prelinger Library's classification shows personality and surprise. These characteristics combine to endow the Prelinger collection with a specific authorial voice.

In an online essay, Megan Shaw Prelinger describes the essence of the library's organization as a conscious attempt to "represent the realms of thought that bounce around the insides of both our [Shaw Prelinger and her husband, Rick Prelinger] minds" in a coherent linear flow across the library's six shelves. This personality is expressed through the library's primary organizing principle: location (when location is relevant, resources are classified according to location over subject in most cases, and location is the first class in the sequence). Lewis-Kraus ties the location principle explicitly to the Prelingers' personal outlook, claiming that "landscape anchors not only the library but the Prelingers' own approach to most intellectual questions" (Lewis-Kraus, 2007, p. 50). In addition, the selection and distribution of resources within the library help to shape both the library's experience and its organization, and this allotment also shows a unique perspective. The Prelingers seem particularly fond of old serials for marginal industries, and their collection includes runs of titles such as *Bus Transportation* and *Candy Manufacturing*.

One way that the library facilitates surprise is by interleaving ephemera within the book shelves. The transportation section, for example, includes, in addition to books about rail travel, a shelf full of nineteenth and early twentieth century local train schedules from various parts of the United States. Another is in the transitions from one subject to another, which often display a subtle wit. One is initially confused to see educational material and textbooks shift into public health and prisons, but Shaw Prelinger explains that these are all examples of government-supported institutions.

Through the construct of authorial voice, the interwoven processes of selection, description, and arrangement provide evidence of a rhetorical motive in the Prelinger Library. The basic rhetorical process described by the literary critic Kenneth Burke via metaphor of courtship appears to be at work (Burke, 1969). According to Burke's courtship model, an author (or rhetor) first entices the reader (or audience) by emphasizing the essential differences between rhetor and audience (heightening the "mystery") and then, as the audience's attention is engaged, by showing how the audience and rhetor, despite their divisions, also share deep similarities (such as working for the same goal or other characteristics), resulting in "identification" between the rhetor and audience. In the case of the Prelinger Library, the "mystery" is evoked by the initial strangeness at seeing thousands upon thousands of overtly mundane publications. The initial presentation of these "useless" items puzzles the user and sets up the sense of division. The authorial voice, though, as manifested in the selection, description, and arrangement, suggests that, on the contrary, these apparently worthless items deserve preservation and care. This sense of care provides the pivot point for the identification to emerge. The visitor to the Prelinger, even if not charmed by old train schedules and the like, identifies with the affection and effort lavished by the Prelingers on their collection. Together, the collection and its classification suggest that all information, however negligible it may seem, deserves preservation, and the visitor is persuaded to give the library's contents serious attention.

*The new bibliography: communicative classification*

While it may be said that a classified collection, the entity that most users actually experience, is the primary carrier of meaning, as opposed to the classification itself, most professional classifications, unlike the Prelinger Library's, are not designed with a specific collection in mind. However, the activities of selection, description, and arrangement are tightly coupled in the shared document collections enabled by various social classification systems (such as del.icio.us, LibraryThing, and Flickr). A tag, for example, does not exist in del.icio.us without being attached to a document.

Hendry and Carlyle (2006) claim that Internet-based shared collections can be seen as a new form of bibliography and suggest that bibliography might provide a conceptual base for such systems. However, bibliographic handbooks provide few details on the selection activity and how it might intersect with arrangement (as, for example, Robinson, 1979, who defers the selection task to "experts"). The historians of bibliography Besterman and Balsamo both disapprove of sixteenth-century Catholic bibliographers who created selective works based on church doctrine, and they imply that any selection principle other than comprehensiveness (albeit within in a particular category) is irresponsible (Besterman, 1936; Balsamo, 1983). Bates (1976) grants the inevitable selectivity of bibliography; however, she focuses on acknowledging selection principles at work, and not studying them to see what they contribute to a bibliography's interpretation of the subject. I suggest that the integration of selection, description, and arrangement may be a key element in formulating authorial voice, and, further, that this voice can be an effective tool in both guiding users to resources and in interpreting those resources.

*References*

Balsamo, Luigi. (1990) *Bibliography, history of a tradition*. (William A. Pettas, trans.) Berkeley: Bernard M. Rosenthal.

Bates, Marcia. (1976) Rigorous systematic bibliography. *RQ* 16, 5–24.

Beghtol, Clare. (1986) Semantic validity: concepts of warrant in bibliographic classification systems. *Library Resources & Technical Services* 30: 109–125.

Beghtol, Clare (2001) Relationships in classificatory structure and meaning. In Bean, Carol A., and Rebecca Green, editors. *Relationships in the organization of knowledge*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Besterman, Theodore. (1936) *The beginnings of systematic bibliography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burke, Kenneth. (1969) *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hendry, D. G. and A. Carlyle (2006) Hotlist or bibliography? A case of genre on the Web. In *Proceedings of the 39th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Science*, Track 3: Digital Media: Genres of Digital Documents, January 4-7, 2006, Computer Society Press.

Lewis-Kraus, Gideon. (2007) A world in three aisles: Browsing the post-digital library. *Harper's* 314 (1884): 47–57.

Prelinger, Megan Shaw. On the organization of the Prelinger library.  
(<http://www.home.earthlink.net/~alysons/LibraryOrg.html>) (Last accessed November 13, 2007.)

Ranganathan, S. R. (1959) *Elements of Library Classification*. London: The Association of Assistant Librarians.

Robinson, A.M. Lewin, with an additional chapter by Margaret Lodder. (1979) *Systematic bibliography: a practical guide to the work of compilation*. London: Clive Bingley.

Sayers, W.C. (1915). *Canons of classification*. London: Grafton.

Shera, Jesse. (1966) *Libraries and the organization of knowledge*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books.

Shirky, Clay. Ontology is overrated: categories, links, and tags.  
([http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology\\_overrated.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology_overrated.html)) (Last accessed November 13, 2007.)