

We Don't Need It. We Can't Afford It. Shut Up. Go Away

by William Benemann

How will you respond? With the recent publication of the Library of Congress KZ schedule for the Law of Nations, law libraries have for the first time a complete, nationally recognized classification schedule for legal materials. If you are the manager of a library with a large foreign and international law collection, you should now be expecting to receive from your Cataloger a proposal to adopt the new schedules, and to reclass all or parts of your collection from whatever local system you have been using up to this point. Before that proposal hits your desk, here are a few questions you should ask so that you will be prepared to make an informed response.

Is it broke (and if it ain't ...)?

Since the primary reason for adopting any subject classification scheme is to arrange your books on the shelf in such a way that like material can be found together, you should test how well your current schedule is working. Try this: go into your foreign and international treatise collection at any point and, going book by book, check to see if there is any logical subject connection between one book and the book next to it. (This can be done from your office if you can search by call number on your OPAC.) You might find this exercise somewhat disturbing. Most local schedules are oriented primarily towards jurisdiction, and they sub-arrange only by broad categories: government regulations, taxation, criminal law, etc. You will likely find some very odd bedfellows.

You should also try the inverse of this exercise. Search under a specific subject heading such as "Divorce—Germany" or "Civil law—Japan." Are most of your books on that topic shelved under the same basic call number? If they are under the same basic call number, are they actually shelved together, or do other books intervene that are way off topic? In other words, can a patron go to your stacks and find your books on one subject in reasonable proximity to one another?

If not, you should consider adopting the Library of Congress schedules. They were developed by experts in the area of foreign and international law, and they provide a level of specificity that allows a user both to browse your collection effectively, and to learn about the structure of the law of the jurisdiction based on the organization of its material.

What's this gonna cost me?

Reclassification projects are not cheap. You may outsource a large part of the work to a commercial service that, for a fee, will provide new call numbers for your foreign and international material in a relatively short period of time. The disruption to your current processing will be minimized, but you should expect many months (perhaps years) of clean-up after the project is officially "completed," since the commercial services depend heavily on machine matches made with little human intervention, and the work will be done by people who do not know your collection's peculiar quirks. Or you can attempt to conduct the project entirely in-house, which will take much longer, place a burden on your existing staff, cost less (or perhaps cost about the same, but be amortized over a longer period of time), and allow for a higher

level of quality control. The best course for your library will depend on the size of your collection, your staff, and your budget.

What if we stay with what we have?

One important consideration is to avoid false economy where reclassification projects are concerned. Doing nothing has its costs also. Continuing to use a parochial classification scheme, almost by definition, ties you to original cataloging, the slowest and most expensive way of producing cataloging records. By spending money once, up front to adopt a nationally recognized schedule, you facilitate the use of less expensive copy cataloging, particularly if there are other collections similar to yours whose cataloging records are of known quality. By placing your own standardized call numbers in a national bibliographic utility, you also participate in the community of shared resources, making everyone's processing faster and cheaper.

Moreover, a well-organized collection is user-friendly and allows for a degree of self service. The more muddled and arcane the organization of your foreign and international material, the greater the burden you are placing on your Reference staff. Your puzzled patrons (those who don't simply give up in exasperation) are likely to bring their problems to the Reference desk, and a Reference librarian who can answer any Anglo-American law question in two minutes flat might need substantially longer to untangle the court system of Uzbekistan. Investing in better bibliographic organization will pay off immediately in savings of public services staff time, and continue to provide dividends to your library for years to come.

Where do we go from here?

If you decide that your patrons could benefit from a better-organized foreign and international law collection, the next step would be to contact either Jean Pajerek at Cornell Law Library (jmp8@cornell.edu) or me at Boalt Hall Law Library, Berkeley (benemann@boalt.berkeley.edu). We are chairing an effort to coordinate foreign law reclassification projects among law libraries, hoping to establish a level of synergy that will spread the burden more evenly, and make it possible for us all to benefit from one another's work. We are both deeply involved in reclass projects in our respective libraries, and would be happy to share our hard-won expertise.

Making a change this drastic in a library's operations is a decision that should not be made lightly, but neither should we shrink from change when the time has come to move our collections to a higher level of access. Foreign and international material has always been complex and expensive. Add to those adjectives the word "voluminous" and you can understand why the old interim classification schedule that once worked so well may now be inadequate to handle the amount of material your library is receiving, or to reflect the sea change that has taken place in international politics during the last decade. Given the amount of money spent on acquiring these materials, it makes sense to expend the necessary resources to make them readily available.

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