Sears Subject Headings

Angela Rathmel
Shari Schawo
Cheryl Sylvester

History of the Sears List

The Sears List of Subject Headings was created in 1923 by Minnie Earl Sears in an attempt to meet the needs of smaller libraries. Her goal was to produce something more suitable for their smaller collections than the already established American Library Association and Library of Congress subject headings. When first established the subject list was based upon what well cataloged small libraries were known to be using at the time (Sears).

Minnie Earl Sears, the woman behind the Sears List
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In the third edition Ms. Sears added a first chapter called "Practical Suggestions for the Beginner in Subject Heading Work" this was later updated and renamed "Principles of the Sears List of Subject Headings" (Wilson); it is a 23 page practical guide for the beginning cataloger in the front of every edition.

Revised and expanded many times over the years to meet the changing needs of libraries the Sears List is currently in its nineteenth edition published in 2007. It is still being used by smaller libraries today, especially for school and children's collections.

Impact for Information Organization

Sears allows for more universal headings and makes access easier for patrons. When faced with too many headings within Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), small to medium libraries use Sears instead of just making up their own headings. It also impacts the global information infrastructure which requires uniformity within an organization. because-Sears provides easier access to global information. The Sears Subject headings share in the global exchange of information as proven by the use in foreign countries who teach library education in English.

Overview

The Sears List is a controlled vocabulary to be used as a reference for cataloging smaller library collections. The volume itself begins with a preface that gives a brief history of the list, its editions, and explanation of its form and classification. "Sears offers a basic list of headings together with patterns and examples that will guide the cataloger in creating additional headings as needed" (Sears ix). The Sears List has modified the Library of Congress subject headings to a simpler form and uses the Dewey Decimal system for classification. The entry form is the major difference that has developed over time; Sears uses direct entry while Library of Congress uses the inverted form (Sears).

A basic example of a Sears's (2000) subject heading :

Meals on wheels programs 362

Use for materials on programs that deliver meals to the homebound.

UF   Home delivered meals programs
BT   **Food relief**

The same heading in Library of Congress (n.d.):

<u>HEADING:</u> **M**eals on wheels programs

<u>Used for/See From:</u> Home delivered meals
                                    Meals for the elderly

<u>Search also under:</u> Older people
Nutrition
Food relief

The Sears list continues on with the Principles of the Sears List section which gives a basic overview of general cataloging, including directions on adding appropriate new subject headings. In Sears the cataloger is encouraged to thoughtfully create necessary subject headings as needed for their individual collection using the Sears form. Sears contains in every new edition a list of cancelled and replacement headings, often taken from the suggestions of the librarians and catalogers that use its list.

Sears List of Subject Headings Symbols

UF = Used for
SA= See also
BT= Broader term
NT= Narrower term
RT= Related term
[Former heading] = Term that was once used as a heading and is no longer.
(May subdiv. Geog.) = Heading that may be subdivided by name of place. (Sears)

Purpose and Use

The American Library and Library of Congress subject headings are too cumbersome, encompassing five volumes.

If the amount of volumes in a subject field is small, or the material's subjects are less specific and more generalized, then Sears is often the better choice.

A major difference to the LCSH and the Sears List is that the "Sears" uses the direct form of entry, replacing the inverted form, on the theory that most library users search for multiple-word terms in the order in which they occur naturally in language.

Who uses it? Small and medium sized libraries are the main users of Sears List. When the catalog in print information (CIP) — that uses LCSH — does not fit a librarian's choice in subject, knowing her patron's search patterns, it would give subject guidelines for original cataloging.

"Some cataloguers, who assign LCSH and Dewey decimal classification numbers to the items in their library's collections, buy a copy of Sears for its Dewey numbers. They find this a quicker way of finding a Dewey number than using Dewey's relative index. Once they have the basic number, they then consult the appropriate section in the Dewey classification" (Weihs, 2004).

"Although Sears maintains conformity to the usage of LCSH as much as is possible...the differences are that Sears

(1) contains fewer technical terms, (2) allows for direct geographic subdivisions rather than indirect, and (3) does not contain inverted headings." (Roe, 2001)

Strengths

Cataloguers assigned Library of Congress subject headings because copy cataloguing almost invariably had Library of Congress subject headings. It was cheaper...to use this cataloguing than to assign Sears subject headings.”
(Weihs, 2004)

- Common language vocabulary makes it easier for patrons to search and retrieve.

- Revised in response to new subject categories and updated Dewey Decimal classifications (e.g. ethnic headings such as Native American , and subdivisions such as travel).

- "Principles of the Sears List" is used often in classes to introduce the topic of subject headings.

- Used in foreign countries where there is education of library collections in English.

- Flexibility and versatility enabling catalogers to add their own headings.

Weaknesses

- Still not well known by beginning librarians or by elementary school media specialists who lack the time to think about subject headings in day to day work.

- Cost to implement — Budget decisions effecting a school library are often not managed by a librarian who knows what is needed, but a school board, superintendent or principal.

- Keyword searching preferences — are subject headings are becoming obsolete?

- Sears List is not updated as often as the LCSH and that means it is not current in evolving topics.
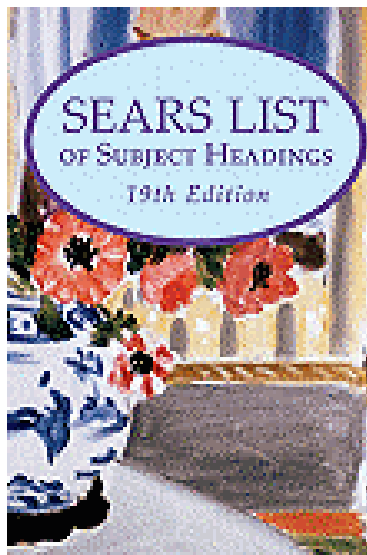
Future Developments

Does the Sears List have a future? Weihs (2004) argues that Sears List's future may be in jeopardy due to the trend of copy cataloging in Libraries and that so much of copy cataloging contains LCSH. Roe (2001) further explains the challenges faced when trying to convert records created with Sears subject headings into LCSH.

However some improvements have been made in this area and services are available for assisting libraries with authority control for Sears subject headings ("Authority Control," 2007).

Snipes (2007) argues that Sears (and Dewey for that matter) fail to be useful cataloging resources for the web environment. However, Janes' (2005) American Libraries column points out that iSchool at Drexel (2007) has done just that by cataloging the Internet Public Library using Sears subject headings.

Weihs (2004) and Simpson (2004) both discussed concern with the quality of binding and thinness of paper in their review of the 19th edition of the Sears List. Perhaps an online version is in order?

Besides being more convenient, an online version may help keep this resource from becoming irrelevant as it would be more easily updated online. It might even make use of the 2.0 tools that Snipes (2007) argues are making Sears obsolete. This would not be as difficult a transition as it would be for LCSH as Sears subject headings are known for using common language vocabulary, much like social tagging.

Currently the closest thing to an online reference for this tool is the "Abridged Web Dewey" (2003) which provides mappings between abridged Dewey numbers and subject headings from the **18th edition** of H.W. Wilson's *Sears List of Subject Headings.*

Resources to explore

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THEORY OF THE
ORGANIZATION OF
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Angie Rathmel
aroads@ku.edu

Shari Schawo
sschawo@tscpl.org

Cheryl Sylvester
csylvester@atchison.lib