

Revising Religion in DDC

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It's been said that knowledge-organizations systems reflect the biases of those who created them. Many think the Dew Decimal Classification System reflects a white, Christian, and heterosexual worldview that is hard to separate from its structure (Higgins & Stark 2021). Complaints about the Dewey Decimal Classification System range from it being stuck in a 19th century worldview (Bolin, 2022, p.173) to it being too intimidating for the average library user (Redihan 2021). The American Library Association voted to remove Melvil Dewey's name from its top honor citing his racism and reports of his sexual harassment of female colleagues (Joseph 2021). Complaints of inherent bias within the classification system itself have brought some information professionals to the conclusion that it needs to be revised or replaced altogether.

Early instances of racial bias within the DDC were encountered by Dorothy Porter, a Black American librarian who collated lists of early African American writing in her published work *Early American Negro Writings: A Bibliographical Study* in 1945. She recalled that a book of poems by James Weldon Johnson, a black poet, were filed under 325, the call number for slavery. This meant that Johnson couldn't be found in the poetry section, an adjustment that needed to be made or else he would risk being undiscovered by those users searching for new voices in poetry (Spires 2022). Today, you can find a book of his poems under 811.52, the call number for American poetry.

Instances of this kind of bias have caused some librarians to question why DDC is still being used. Attempts have been made to switch from DDC to a new classification system in public libraries due to its perceived bias and reports that many patrons find it intimidating. The Rangeview Library System in Colorado shifted away from DDC in 2008 to a BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communication) model, the kind used

by bookstores. It was received favorably by the public though some staff librarians lamented the change. However, bias still exists in this new classification system and there doesn't seem to be a way to circumvent this (Redihan 2021).

The Nyack Library in New York attempted to abandon DDC in 2011, but public pressure forced the library to revert to DDC. Their new Marketplace System was a modified version of the BISAC system, but users complained that it was more difficult to navigate than DDC. One issue with Marketplace was that it did not organize materials by format so cooking magazines were located with cookbooks. Many staff members did not embrace this new system and library pages struggled with where to shelve items. James Mahoney was the library director at the time of Marketplace's implementation. He retired the following year, and his replacement had the library revert to DDC with the full support of the board of trustees (Redihan 2021).

With the risk of public backlash and wasted staff time and resources, perhaps a revision of DDC is preferable to outright abandonment. Literary warrant refers to the necessity of creating new notations for a classification scheme when information resources are available for a new concept (Joudrey & Taylor, 2018, pp 557-558). This concept was formulated by Edward Wyndham Hulme and was included in a series of articles titled "Principles of Book Classification" that ran in the *Library Association Record* between 1911 and 1912. In 1962, Farradine argued for the use of literary warrant when considering the user's point of view in classification schemes. Even in the introduction to the 15th edition of *Dewey Decimal Classification and Relative Index*, there is a resignation that it will not be the last edition of the DDC and today's criticisms may one day lead to a perfected edition of the classification system (Majumdar 2021).

Sandip Majumdar, an assistant professor at the Department of Library and Information Science at the University of Gour Banga, states that there has been a shift from the western-centric approach of classification to a more internationalist view in this age of globally shared information. Literary warrant has been applied to successive editions of the Dewey Decimal System since it was first documented in the 15th edition. He argues that there is a failsafe against bias in current Dewey Decimal classification by referencing a blog posted by Violet Fox, a DDC editor (Majumdar 2021).

Violet Fox states that modern DDC editors are strongly committed to the idea of literary warrant, the way the “body of published literature is used as a way of representing the structure of knowledge.” The need to create a new DDC number for a new topic is based on whether at least twenty works have been published about said topic. The body of work informing users about a new topic is what determines the addition of a new classification number, not the possible bias of the editor (Fox 2019). The OCLC wants regular feedback from information professionals through online surveys and polls. They even have a Dewey contributors’ site where librarians can send proposals and be involved in the editorial process (Majumdar 2021).

The religion class of the Dewey Decimal Classification System is often labelled as biased toward Christianity. The first nine divisions of this class are devoted to Christianity with only the 290 division designated for “Other Religions” (Jiwa 2022). An alternative arrangement for the Religion class in DDC was approved by the OCLC back in 2012. This optional arrangement uses a chronological/regional view to reduce Christian bias in DDC for those library systems that wish to implement it. Dr. Rebecca

Green, the Dewey Editorial Program Manager, created a new mapping for this alternative arrangement for the 200s (Thornton 2024).

An implementation of this reclassification was undertaken at the Scotch Plains Public Library in New Jersey. To make this reclassification project less disruptive to patrons, the collection was reassigned in phases. This allowed for most materials to still be available for checkout. Green dots were placed on the spine of each reassigned book so the staff could better locate any books that might have been missed. The same was done for any audio and video materials requiring reclassification. Adult materials were reclassified before juvenile materials were (Thornton 2024).

It was observed that one way this reduced Christian bias in DDC was by allowing for more specificity in classification numbers for non-Christian religions. Books on Buddhism benefited greatly from this. Standard DDC puts the topic between 294.3 and 294.39. Many public libraries limit DDC numbers to eight characters and the standard classification offers little room for number-building. A book on Buddhist religious experience would get assigned 294.344 in the standard DDC Religion, but the optional DDC Religion would have 227.9 assigned to the same topic. That leaves three more characters available to it on the spine label. This new arrangement proved successful a year after implementation, and it is easy to maintain as new 200 materials are added to the collection (Thornton 2024).

Critics of the Dewey Decimal Classification System are quick to point out its bias, but Dewey editors over at the OCLC are aware of its flaws and have listened to this criticism, inviting suggestions from information professionals, and even offering an alternative arrangement for the Religion class. As more and more countries adopt the

Dewey Decimal System, American bias will be called out and perhaps, one day, the Dewey Decimal System will have a more international outlook to classifying information. We've come a long way from its first edition.

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