

FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

Role of Classification and Cataloguing in the Information Age

NR Satyanarayana

Ever since man began recording information, it made little difference to him whether the information is recorded as baked in clay tablets, written on papyrus scroll, printed in books, or available in electronic form or digital libraries. But he had been continuously facing the problem of storing and organising these records, so that these could be located easily whenever needed. Then arose the need to index and classify the literature, and subsequently many systems of indexing and classification have been devised. Manual methods of indexing and classification are time consuming and require skilled personnel. Of late, the challenge is to develop ways and means of applying computer technology for the analysis of natural language text. It is aimed to design and derive automated processor for indexing and classifying documents and improving retrieval techniques. The first and foremost question therefore is whether computers can be used for classification and whether human classification can be superseded by computerised techniques? Secondly, how far computers can be adopted for retrieval techniques and how manual catalogues can be replaced by digital catalogues?

The two technical services in libraries—classification and cataloguing—are still the basic tools for bibliographic organisation in libraries and have evolved making use of available technology of the day. Even in the present information age, technical services are necessary to help libraries to accomplish their mission, i.e., every user and his or her information. New technological devices accord ample opportunity to improve library services to the user. Dr Satija in his paper observes that OPACs, apart from having tremendous capacity, also have equally versatile and powerful searching capabilities and mechanism. Classification has many new roles to play in designing, searching and managing an electronic database. He cites an example to illustrate the role of IT in editing and publishing classification schedules. Dr Dhyani's paper presents a retrospective picture of classification as a helpful tool for logical arrangement or clustering of documents from Dewey era to computer age. Categorisation of universe of knowledge has been the core factor. Both human beings as well as machines used one or the other form of classificatory language for the purpose of classification or categorisation. With the advent of new technology with its varied techniques, many methods are being evolved and experimented to provide a proper and helpful classification system for use in information storage and retrieval. The problem of compatibility still remains the potent subject for further research. Almost the same view was taken by Ms Jaiswal in her paper on Automatic Document Classification. According to her, the use of automatically constructed classification is still a subject for investigation. Although many techniques have been developed but the successful implementation of such techniques has not been made possible till date. It is, perhaps, because there is no complete theory of knowledge representation. Therefore, automatic classification is still a goal rather than a reality.

Both the librarians and library users have been interested in the catalogue as an information retrieval tool irrespective of its form. However, the objectives set out by CA Cutter as far back as 1876 are still being attempted by librarians throughout the world. The librarians in the automated environment are required to develop more effective methods of service to facilitate better access point and multi-dimension searches in the library holdings. Dr Sewa Singh throws light on these areas in his article. Mr Rajesh Singh's paper addresses such problems in cataloguing in two different technological contexts—printed card catalogue and online catalogue.

The fundamental purpose of a library is to see that its resources are utilised for maximum help to information seekers. Classification and cataloguing are the two techniques designed to facilitate its use. These help to expedite the fullest possible revelation of knowledge stored in a library collection. For total retrieval strategy, a complementary approach is essential for satisfactory revelation of the contents of the collection. Support is, therefore, necessary from alternative means of accessing information, such as catalogues, bibliographies, subject indexes with alternative subject approaches and reader's advisory services in guiding the user through the collection. Any system, either manual or mechanical, should be able to display a great deal of resources on any subject and thus save time in allowing purposive browsing and searching for information.

Although researches in this area have been going on for the last two decades, still there is no sign that automatic procedures are sufficiently developed to replace manual procedures. Most of these findings lack theoretical justification. In document classification, it is necessary to recognise the inter-relationship of terms and keywords. Then devise a mechanism in algorithm-design to compute similarities between keywords. This is a tough job. Though several attempts have been made at automatic technique the main barrier still remains the same, i.e., the lack of complete theory of knowledge representation. This is the area for research with great promise.

It is, therefore, more befitting to conclude this discussion by quoting Arthur Maltby which holds good even today. Maltby states: "The real issue confronting is to find a constructive and viable alternative to classification that can serve most library situations so well—for despite the difficulties classification is a good servant." This stands equally good for cataloguing too.

Dr NR Satyanarayana is Head of the Department of Library and Information Science, Lucknow University, Lucknow.