From the University Presses – Why I Hate the BISAC Codes

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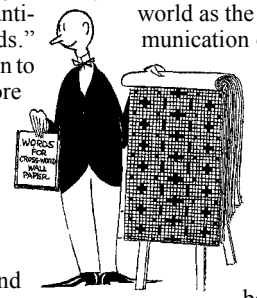
In my column for the December 2009 issue about **"Google 2.0: Still a Mixed Blessing,"** I referred at the end to the criticism that has already been made of **Google's** decision to use the BISAC codes for identifying books by subject category by, among others, **Geoffrey Nunberg**, who said: "The BISAC scheme is well-suited for a chain bookstore or a small public library, where consumers or patrons browse for books on the shelves. But it's of little use when you're flying blind in a library with several million titles, including scholarly works, foreign works, and vast quantities of books from earlier periods." And I concluded: "**Google's** decision to employ BISAC codes is yet one more glaring revelation of how skewed the Settlement is toward the interests of trade-book authors and commercial trade-book publishers rather than academic authors and academic presses."



I want in this article to expand on that critique and demonstrate more fully why the BISAC codes so ill-serve the academic community and the scholarly publishers that support it. At a very general level, it must be said that, just as the interests of the STM journal publishers mainly determine what positions the **AAP** takes on issues in journal publishing, so too the commercial trade publishers so dominate the **AAP's** board that their interests come first whenever new policies are adopted. Scholarly book publishers (not including here college textbook publishers, which form a subindustry of their own) constitute a very small minority of **AAP** members and have little chance to exert much influence over decisions made, such as the choice of what metadata to use. Although the **Book Industry Study Group (BISG)** is an independent nonprofit agency that presumes to serve all sectors of the book industry, and that was created in 1975 by a number of trade associations besides the **AAP** (such as the **Book Manufacturers Institute** and the **American Booksellers Association**), it is very much a stepchild of the **AAP**, and those who serve on its various committees reflect that influence.

As **Wikipedia's** entry for **BISG** notes, "Through BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications), **BISG** has been on the cutting edge of technological advances with the development of bar-code technology standards and electronic business communications formats. BISAC has been instrumental in developing many of the electronic standards that have reduced operating costs for members of the industry. BISAC Subject Codes, for example, are a mainstay in the industry and required for participation in many databases." They work in conjunction with the ONIX system of data interchange that major vendors have increasingly come to demand that all publishers use. ONIX, which is the acronym for ONline Information eXchange, is described by the organization that created and oversees it, EDItEUR (established in 1991), as "an XML-based family of international standards intended to support computer-to-computer communication between parties involved in creating, distributing, licensing, or otherwise making available intellectual property in published form, whether physical or digital." ONIX for Books, the most widely-adopted of EDItEUR's standards that was initially released in 2000, "is now firmly established around the world as the book-trade standard for the communication of 'rich product metadata' — the type of metadata that are needed to support the sale of books in the supply chain, not least for online retailing" (*http://www.editeur.org/74/FAQs/#q2*). Even from this brief description one can get a sense of how crucial BISAC codes are for the smooth functioning of commerce in the book-trade today.

So, how well do the BISAC codes work for academic books? Not well at all, in my opinion, based on my more than forty years' experience as an editor in university press publishing. The examples I will provide of their dysfunctionality come from the fields of scholarship I know best: Latin American Studies, Philosophy, Political Science, and Sociology. Of these four fields, it should be noted at the outset, the BISAC coding system recognizes only Philosophy and Political Science as major categories. Perhaps it is understandable that no regional field of study is given this pride of place in the BISAC system, even though area studies have long been prominent in higher education, but it is surprising that not even Anthropology and Sociology are accorded a primary category. Instead, these two are lumped together under a generic Social Science heading. Is one to infer that neither Economics (which exists separately only as Business and Economics) nor Political Science nor Psychology (which gets its own separate heading) are social sciences?

How does one identify books in Latin American Studies, then? The BISAC system requires one to scurry around looking for appropriate codes under a number of other categories, including Art, Business and Economics, History, Law, Literary Criticism, Religion, and Social Science. For a title about economic development in Latin America, for instance, one can find a subcategory called Business and Economics/Development/Business Development, which seems presumptuous in pigeonholing all of economic development as business development, but no regional identifiers under Business and Economics. Looking under Social Science, one finds a subcategory for only Third World Development in general, not for any specific region. The best one can do to add a regionally delimiting identifier is to resort to History, where there are plenty of regional subcategories. Interestingly, among the subcategories specific to Latin America there are four: Central America, General, Mexico, and South America. (In an earlier version of the codes, South America was absent.) Why separate out just Mexico? In terms of salience in U.S. history, if that is the criterion, Cuba has been equally prominent. But a book on economic development may be an econometric analysis, highly mathematical, drawing on data from Latin America but hardly engaging in anything that we would recognize as traditional history.

At **Penn State** we publish many books on comparative politics and on social movements in Latin America. How do we identify these with BISAC codes? Political Science contains no regional subcategories, either, so the best one can do under that rubric is to choose Political Science/Government/Comparative. Third World Development under Social Science is generally not helpful here because comparative politics only sometimes focuses on development issues. Once again, History has to come to the rescue, but if it is a comparative study of Argentina and Mexico, say, the only possible choice is Latin America/General. (Asia and Africa each has seven subcategories, while Europe has fifteen.) But not every book in comparative politics is fairly described as History, either. Social movements, though a major topic of study by political scientists, receives no identifier specific to it under Political Science, nor is there any under Social Science, either, though anthropologists and especially sociologists produce many studies of social movements also. Nowhere in the entire BISAC system is there any way of identifying a book about social movements despite its prominence as a topic of research in academe. Even History can only partially come to the rescue here, with its subcategories of Revolutionary and Social History.

The **American Political Science Association** has long structured the discipline according to four main categories: American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Political Theory. The BISAC committee that invented the codes for Political Science is evidently unaware of this fact. Only International Relations gets recognized as a subcategory at the secondary level. American Politics gets no recognition at all. Comparative appears as a tertiary subcategory, as noted above. For Political Theory one is forced to choose between History and Theory as a subcategory or one of the seven subcategories of Political Ideologies: Anarchism, Communism & Socialism, Conservatism & Liberalism, Democracy, Fascism & Totalitarianism, General, and Nationalism. These are hardly very adequate signifiers for books in this field. A

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better choice exists under Philosophy, which has a subcategory of Political.

Sociology fares no better. The **American Sociological Association** has 48 official sections, which range from Aging & the Life Course to Theory. The BISAC system accords only four subcategories to Sociology, with the tertiary subcategories being General, Marriage & Family, Rural, and Urban. It is true that as secondary categories BISAC also recognizes such subfields as Criminology, Demography, Gerontology, and Sociology of Religion. Comparing BISAC's codes for Social Science with the **ASA's** sections reveals that 33 of the latter are completely ignored by the BISAC system, including such significant ones as Collective Behavior & Social Movements, Comparative & Historical Sociology, Economic Sociology, History of Sociology, Mathematical Sociology, Medical Sociology, Organizations, Occupations & Work, Political Sociology, and Theory. Some are only partially covered by BISAC, such as **ASA's** section on Sociology of Culture, which BISAC recognizes only with the secondary subcategory of Popular Culture. Why wouldn't the BISAC committee think to look at how sociologists themselves divide up their intellectual terrain before deciding what categories to include under Social Science? This is a sin of omission, to say the very least.

Philosophy gets its own main category, but there must not have been any philosophy majors represented on the BISAC committee, because its topical identifiers don't correspond well with how philosophers think about their discipline. Yes, there are some subcategories that do reflect standard subfields, like Aesthetics, Epistemology, Ethics & Moral Philosophy (what's the difference between the two?), Logic, Metaphysics, Political Philosophy, and Philosophy of Religion (though BISAC calls this "Religious" Philosophy instead, which is a misnomer). But where is Feminist Philosophy, Legal Philosophy, Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of History (as opposed to History of Philosophy), Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Mathematics, and Philosophy of Science — all standard subfields in the discipline? All the BISAC committee had to do to see how incomplete its subcategories are was to consult the **Wikipedia** entry for "Philosophy," for heaven's sake, let alone the authoritative *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available free to anyone online. There is simply no easy way to identify a title as feminist philosophy in the BISAC system, for instance. One has to resort to adding the subcategory of Feminism & Feminist Theory or perhaps Gender Studies from the Social Science codes along with some more generic codes from Philosophy, perhaps Political if that fits the subject of the particular book. One guesses that the BISAC committee members were used to browsing in the sections of retail bookstores that use "New Age" instead of "Philosophy" as designators, given the number of codes dedicated to various types of Eastern religions. While the BISAC committee ignored "Movements" as a subcategory in either Political Science or Sociology, curiously 9 of the 34 subcategories in Philosophy are devoted to them, though it is difficult to understand in what way Rationalism and Utilitarianism, to name two of the tertiary subcategories, constitute "movements" in any ordinary sense. It seems peculiar, to say the least, to carve out a special subcategory for Good & Evil and for Body & Mind, when these are merely subjects taken up in Ethics or Philosophy of Religion and Epistemology, respectively. So, too, for Free Will & Determinism. Have you ever seen a shelf in a bookstore with those designations? And then there is a subcategory of Criticism. What on earth does that mean to philosophy? What were the BISAC folks thinking?

It seems clear that the BISAC committee was much more interested in books that actually get onto the shelves of many bricks-and-mortar bookstores than in scholarly books. Juvenile Fiction and Nonfiction both get literally hundreds of secondary and tertiary subcategories devoted to them, well in excess of all the "academic" categories combined. Under both main categories, for instance, there are 27 tertiary subcategories listed under the secondary subcategory Social Issues (earlier called "Situations"). Reflecting the New Age bent of the BISAC committee, there are 44 subcategories under the main heading of Body, Mind & Spirit, almost 30% more than the entire Philosophy category contains. The evidence for the relative importance accorded by the BISAC committee to trade over academic titles is spread throughout the BISAC coding list.

Why is this a problem? It is because, as **Geoffrey Nunberg** and others have pointed out, the BISAC codes are now becoming so standard that they are being adopted even when applying them is not appropriate and positively harmful, as with **Google's** decision to use the codes for its proposed bookselling programs under the Settlement agreement despite the acknowledged fact that the largest number of titles included in its mass digitization project are academic, not trade, books. Is there anything we can do to improve the codes and make them more useful for scholarly books? A couple of years ago I approached BISAC's executive director, **Michael Healey** (now head of the **Book Rights Registry** under the **Google Settlement**), and volunteered to work with the BISAC committee on choosing codes better suited for the academic marketplace and more in keeping with the way scholars themselves think about their fields. The response was "Fine, but you first have to become a member of **BISG**." The fee at that time for a university press of **Penn State's** size was around $1,250. I did not feel it an expenditure I could justify asking the **Press** to pay for the sake of offering advice to **BISG**. I hope that the folks on the BISAC committee will at least find their way to this article and absorb the lessons I want it to convey.