

# Book Review

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**Library Classification Trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**, by Rajendra Kumbhar.

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The intent of this book is “to trace the developmental trends in classification as reflected in the library and information science literature published in the last decade, i.e., the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. ix). The method used was to search ten years (1999-2009) of the *Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA)* using the search term “classification” and further refining the resulting set to the abstracts that dealt specifically with classification (omitting book reviews and “other” publications that the author judged not on the topic). These were reviewed and organized into ten chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of classification, from KO systems, to classification uses, to classification schemes, education and modern trends. Within each chapter the articles are organized into subthemes, and the literature is summarized in the style of a descriptive annotated bibliography. As far as I could tell, the content of the chapters and subdivisions is determined exclusively by what was covered in LISA, but no more.

The author offers very little in terms of reflective synthesis or commentary that does not directly come from the literature being reviewed. In this sense, then, the book is uneven in its coverage and thin in its cohesion as a discussion of “trends” except to note that something was published on a given topic. Annotations are strung together without a general framework in the form of an evaluative (rather than merely descriptive) introduction to each chapter or section. Nevertheless, despite the uneven coverage and lack of editorial voice, the book can serve as a starting point for a deeper discussion of what forms the actual intellectual movement in the field. A follow-up work could put the pieces together to create rhetorical arguments for describing evolving thought, change in emphasis in

practice and research, novelty, influences both internally or in cognate areas, or most telling, debate in the field. These are missing in the present work, but begging for development. Many of the components are here, but unfortunately they are put together without a conceptual shell to explain the trends.

In reading the specific entries I was struck by how difficult it was create such interpretation for oneself. There is a bibliography of the abstracts covered, but these are not indexed to the text. There is no index of authors, so it is impossible to discover the various contributions of individuals to developments. In other words, it is difficult to get a bigger picture through tracing the network of publications and the connections among them. This is a shame because there are parts of the book that are quite rich in detail – the sections on text categorization and classification schemes being two of them, and yet there is no graceful way to connect them to anything else in other sections.

A big part of the problem arises from the sparse and limited criteria for establishing the data set in the first place (only what was covered by LISA, only what was mentioned in the abstracts and only searches on the term “classification”). While a substantive number of abstracts were used as the base, there are very large gaps. For example, there is a brief mention of work on genre, but none of the several HICSS (Hawaii International Conference on Systems Science) sessions is included. These are evidently not covered by LISA, but in fact form an interesting and strong “trend” in which the principles of classification influence many other areas of scholarly endeavor outside the field of library and information science. Similar filtering of classification into other fields has been occurring in computational linguistics, retrieval systems, and personal information management. All of these are touched on lightly in the book, but without any explicit discussion of how the trend lines are crossing, which way the trends are moving, or how the various fields are benefitting from cross-pollination.

Closer to home, the author devotes only about a page (138-139) on conferences. This is, in principle, an excellent way of tracking trends because not only do

the papers and panels reflect the latest thinking, the themes of the conferences themselves form a sort of timeline of evolving interest and focus, as well as a peek into what is “trending” (to use some popular jargon) into the future. Perhaps if *LISA* and conferences were combined for a decade’s worth of literature, the picture may have been more complete. As it is, the author omits mention of several of the ISKO conferences that occur biennially, the work emanating from the many ISKO chapters around the world that also have conferences, seminars and workshops, and the American Society for Information Science and Technology Special Interest Group on Classification Research (SIG/CR) that has been specializing for over two decades in convening both researchers and practitioners in an annual workshop specifically focused on trends (e.g., social networking, museums, and so on).

I would encourage the author to pursue the review already started in this volume and push the work in three ways:

- Expand the base of literature beyond *LISA* to other literatures that are more reflective of the broadening reach of classification work. Keeping it parochial produces a local picture that does not do the field justice.
- Include what is published outside of the traditional literature, such as conferences, workshops, institutes and the private sector. If, as the author rightly asserts, classification is at the core of much important knowledge work, then the boundaries of a review must be expanded accordingly.
- Provide a much needed overview of the connections between the various contributions to our im-

pressive body of work as suggested in the pages of this book. These could be in the form of a semantic map, a citation network, a description of the relationships among working practitioners, researchers and applications developers. At the very least a way of tracing authors and works should be provided so that readers can develop their own pathways and connections.

By way of example, the call for papers for the ISKO UK Biennial Conference for next year summarizes some current trends in the role of classification. These all seem to be towards “pushing the boundaries,” and include the boundaries between research and practice and how to achieve better synergy; between knowledge management professionals and IT professionals; or between one scientific discipline and another (with new knowledge taking shape at the boundary). What are the trends that are captured in the ten years of *LISA*-indexed literature? It’s difficult to tell from the volume as published, but an interesting narrative is just waiting to be told.

## Reference

ISKO UK Conference 2013: Call for Papers. Available: <http://www.iskouk.org/conf2013/index.htm>

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