A *Code for Classifiers*:
Whatever Happened to Merrill's Code?

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ABSTRACT: The work titled *Code for Classifiers* by William Stetson Merrill is examined. The development of Merrill's *Code* over a period of 27 years, 1912-1939 is traced by examining bibliographic, attribution, conceptual and contextual differences. The general principles advocated, the differences between variants, and three controversial features of the *Code*: 1) the distinction between classifying vs. classification, 2) borrowing of the bibliographic principle of authorial intention, and 3) use of Dewey Decimal class numbers for classified sequence of topics, are also discussed. The paper reveals the importance of the *Code* in its own time, the complexities of its presentation and assessment by its contemporaries, and it's status today.

Introduction

There appear to be at least four printed versions, in English, of a work by William Stetson Merrill with the short title, *Code for Classifiers* [3, 4, 5, 6]. The first appeared in 1912 [6] and is essentially a description of the problems in classification arguing the need for a classifier's code, a code that transcended individual classification systems. An early description of a code for classifers was also presented by Merrill, then Head of Classification at the Newberry Library, as two lectures delivered to the Library School at the University of Illinois. Merrill had been invited to do so by Phineas Windsor, Librarian.

A year earlier, in 1911, Merrill had prepared a paper and submitted a resolution asking the ALA Executive Board to appoint a Committee on a code for classifiers [7]. In response a special Committee of the ALA was appointed with Merrill as Chair to consider the "preparation of such a code" that included famed classificationists J.C.M. Hanson, Charles Martel, and other prominent librarians of the time such as Phineas Windsor [4, p. vii]. In 1914, the ALA Committee on a Code for Classifiers issued in mimeograph form "*A Code for Classifiers: A Collection of Data Compiled for the Use of the Committee By William Stetson Merrill, Chairman.*" [3]. In November 1928, fourteen years later, the ALA published what is generally considered the first edition of the "*Code for Classifiers: Principles Governing the Consistent Placing of Books in a System of Classification.*" [4]. However, less than a year later, ALA issued an intended variant [2, 10]. Eleven years later the second edition of the *Code* was published by ALA in 1939 [5].

This short history leaves us with many unanswered questions about the *Code for Classifiers*. These include: 1) What is the *Code for Classifiers*? 2) What are the differences between the various editions? 3) Why did it take 14 years to publish the first edition? 4) How did Merrill compile the data for the *Code*? What is the status of the *Code* today? The rest of this paper answers these questions. The history of the development of the *Code*, the versions that emerged from it (1914, 1928, and 1939), and the reactions to each of these versions are first presented. Significant variations between the editions and what

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the differences represent are then analyzed. Finally, the current status of the *Code* is explored in order to suggest why the *Code* is worthy of further study.

The Code for Classifiers

In a 1911 paper read at the Pasadena conference, Merrill outlined the practical problems classifiers of the day faced (for example, what are the classification criteria that best fit a library) and distinguished them from theoretical problems of classification. The same paper also requested the appointment of an ALA committee on a code for classifiers. In 1912 he gave two lectures at the University of Illinois where he discussed many of the general principles for library classifiers that could become a part of a code for classifiers ("aboutness," "intent of the author," "class of reader for whom the book is intended," and "subject vs. topic" distinctions). Again, he emphasized that differences between general problems (theoretical principles) of classification; practical principles that would help promote consistency in the art of classifying books in libraries, irrespective of the classification scheme used by the library, was the focus of the code.

From the lectures, we learn that four schemes of classification were being used in American libraries of the time: Dewey's *Decimal Classification* (*DDC*), *Library of Congress Classification* (*LC*), Cutter's *Expansive Classification* (*EC*), and Brown's *Subject Classification* (*BCS*). Examples of specific titles are provided for classifying problems such as complex topics, coordinate topics, unrelated topics, bias and influence relations among topics. Works by Ernest Richardson and James Brown are summarized [27, 28, 29] to provide a list of the *general characteristics* of books and the *subject characteristics* that may be used for classifying. Merrill contrasts the **art of classifying** from the **science of classification.** While subject is recognized as being the most important in provision of access, Merrill cautions that other types of classification are also appropriate for differing uses and different types of materials: for example, dates for arrangement of incunabula. He categorizes himself as a practical classifier; he is interested in the practice of library classification.

In the 1914 mimeograph *Code*, Merrill offers two sections of an alphabetical arrangement of the 285 rules that he used for classifying materials in the Newberry Library. The two sections of rules were for "The One-topic book" and "The Two-topic book." In the 1928 *Code*, the number of these rules were increased to 300 reflecting the increase in subject coverage. Grace O. Kelley, classifer at John Crerar Li-

brary, provided a number of the Science and Technology principles that were in use at John Crerar. The 1928 *Code* included five general principles, and the 300 rules were arranged in a classified order with *DDC* class numbers to indicate sequence. The classified arrangement was the idea of Julia Pettee, Union Theological Seminary, New York. In the 1939 *Code*, there were 365 rules for classifying books and by this time Merrill had greatly expanded his sources for the rules and principles in the *Code*. Besides his own rules, those of the committee members, the women named above, and feedback he had received from public announcements, he had also used the results of a comprehensive study of libraries conducted by the American Librarian Association, the 1926 ALA Survey [15] as a source of data for the 1928 edition. For the 1939 edition, he dropped the 1926 ALA Survey as a data source and used responses from the 30 libraries, which completed a new survey that he prepared and ALA administered.

Figures 1 and 2 show exact reproductions (content-wise not typographical) of the rules from the two sections of the 1914 *Code*. The term "Query" in Figure 2 represents a specific statement about which Merrill and the Committee sought feedback.

Reaction to the 1914 *Code*

Merrill sent personal letters to leading librarians and libraries along with a copy of the mimeograph requesting feedback on the rules. In response, comments and criticism of the 1914 compilation of rules for classifying came from libraries of all types: academic, public, and special [6]. W.C. Lane wrote from Harvard College Library: "an excellent and very suggestive piece of work. Mr. Currier and the classifiers of the Shelf Department will, I am sure, be glad to have it, and perhaps they will send additional notes." Clement A. Andrews, John Crerar Library, wrote: "A priori it seems to me that its usefulness ought to be considerable." Harrison Carver, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, noted: "The data seems to me exactly the kind of thing that most classifiers ought to have in hand all the time …" Theresa Hitchler of the Brooklyn Public Library and W. Law Vogue of the Mechanics Institute's Mechanics Mercantile Library in San Francisco requested copies of it. The most substantive and interesting responses, however, came from three women. Ida Farrar, Jennie Dorcas Fellows, and Julia Pettee were to play an influential role and determine the structure and content of future editions of the *Code*.

<u>Animals in art</u>.
        Class in art, not in sociology
         E.g.

Note. The works treating of these topics give little information, even at their fullest, about animals as such; but tell how they are viewed and represented as subjects of art, and explain their significance and symbolism.

<u>Animals in literature</u>.

<u>Influence of one thing upon another</u>.
        <u>See</u> this heading under the Two-topic book.

New Subjects

(a)
Make a new heading for a new subject, in preference to classing a book on such a subject along with others under an in-clusive heading.
        E.g. Pedagogical anthropology

Note: The reasons are: (1) a new subject usually persists, at least for some time, and the literature upon it grows; (2) classing under some subject that does not bring out the new feature buries the book and defeats the intent of the author.

(b)
Do not force books on really new topics under some related topic merely because the system has no provision for them. Science and arts are both growing intensively and extensively and it is a mistake to make no place for new subjects. If this is not done, the new subject has no place in the classification although the books upon it are in the library.
        E.g. Automobiles, Aviation, Psychology in Special aspects.

Figure 1: Entries from the 1914 Code [3] Section One, The One-Topic Book, p. 7, p. 43, p. 59.

"And"

<center>General rule</center>

Works treating of two or more topics represented by terms connected by "and":

Class according to the meaning of the title and the intent of the author
Note. The conjunction "and", occurring on a title-page may have various meanings, upon which will depend the proper classification of a book.
E.g. "Art" and "ritual" may mean the way in which art has grown out of ritual; "Norse literature and English literature" may mean the Norse sources of English literature; "Shatfesbury" and "Wieland may mean the indebtedness of Ireland to Shatfesbury; "Cardinal Alemand and the Great Schism" may mean the share or work of Alemand in that movement; finally, "Electricity and magnetism" may mean simply that both subjects are treated in one book. The classifier must first determine the meaning of "and" on a title-page before he attempts to determine the classification of the book.

See also "Influence".

<u>"And". Action concerning persons</u>. A work on the acts, or containing the proceedings of a tribunal against a special class of offenders, e.g. merchants:

Class with other proceedings of such a tribunal, not under the topic represented by the class, e.g. commerce.   (Query)

E.g. English merchant and the Spanish Inquisition in the Canaries …ed. By L. de Alberti and A.E. Wallis Chapman (London, 1912)
Class under Inquisition in the Canaries, not under English commerce with the Canaries.   (Query)

Figure 2: Entries from the 1914 Code [3], Section two, The Two-topic book, p. 98

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Ida F. Farrar, City Library Association of Springfield, Massachusetts, wrote that it "promises to be a very helpful aid to classifiers. Covers many points about which there are liable to be dispute in a logical and sensible fashion." Then, under the heading "Points of criticism" she filled 15 pages with statements and directives such as, "headings too general" and "add more cross-references."

The next criticism of the *Code* came from Jennie D. Fellows (generally known as Dorkas Fellows), Head Classifier, State Library, Albany, New York, in a letter dated 26 November 1914. Fellows later became Editor of the *Dewey Decimal Classification* and a great collaborator of Melvil Dewey and thus, her criticism is important to note, She questioned Merrill's advocacy of the "intent of the author" as the primary principle to be used by classifiers in determining what the book is about and cites Wyer as the authority with whom she agrees. Wyer and she felt that the *Code* over-emphasized the principle of authorial intention in determining the subject of the book (aboutness). Furthermore, she did not think that directions for classification can be codified as easily as those for cataloging. "In spite of this difficulty, however, I feel that such a code as yours would be very valuable." Her final charge was that "probably no well-established library would find it practicable to subscribe to it in every detail because of policies already adopted, but to libraries starting out, with little experience it seems to me that it would be helpful in the extreme." In her conclusion Dorkas Fellows summarized a comment on the *Code* by Miss Jean Hawkins who found it useful for teaching library classification. Miss Hawkins had formerly been Head Classifer in the NY State Library and was now an instructor in classification at the NYPL (New York Public Library) Library School, which Melvil Dewey had brought with him from Columbia University (Dewey's first library school was established in 1884 at Columbia). Fellows wrote that "Miss Hawkins … said that it contained much of just the material which it was necessary to impress on beginners and she found some points which she immediately adopted for her next lesson…"

Merrill's response was prompt and went straight to what he perceived as the heart of the matter; on Dec. 4 he wrote to Fellows that two copies were being sent, one for her and one for Hawkins. He asked Fellows to annotate her copy and note whether the "rules given in it agree with or deviate from the practice of the State Library." He continued: "You write, "probably no well-established library would find it

practicable to subscribe to it in every detail." Permit me to say that it is not intended to be "subscribed to," but to be marked with "yes" or "no," according as the practice of the library to which it is sent agrees or disagrees with the tentative rules in it."

The final substantive set of comments came from Julia Pettee, Union Theological Seminary. Pettee was "tremendously impressed with the amount of work" Merrill had already done and her one "criticism" was with regard to the "alphabetical form;" she requested and received permission to arrange the material in the Code in a "classed order" because " a work of this sort should have some organic relation to the general principles underlying our various schemes and to show this an arrangement by subject groups is important."

Ten years later, in beginning preparation for the first formal edition of the *Code*, Merrill used these responses to the 1914 edition as well as the ALA Survey of 1926 [15]. He was meticulous about giving credit. In March 1927 he wrote to Farrar, Fellows, Kelley, and Pettee, "I am preparing a new edition of the *Code for Classifiers*, rearranged in classified form and much amplified" and requested their permission to give them credit and quote from their letters. Merrill looked upon them all as collaborators.

In his reminiscences, written many decades after the 1939 *Code* was published from his retirement home (see Figure 3) in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, Merrill commented on how the consensus for the *Code* developed:

My *Code for Classifiers* was published in 1928 by the American Library Association. I had begun gathering data for such a work more than fifteen years before. Whenever I pondered as to which place in our classification I should assign a book having features that seemed to fit it with equal propriety to more than one place, I made a note of my decision. In that way I would preserve consistency when other books of similar trend might be classified. I showed my notes to Mr. P.L. Windsor who looked them through and then, to my surprise, invited me to deliver two lectures on the subject before the Library School of the University of Illinois, of which he was Director … I drew up tentative rules following the lines of the lectures; mimeographed sheets were prepared in a number of copies, which were sent out to a number of the larger libraries of the country and to library schools …. The text as finally prepared was not merely

a recording of personal opinions; it was in its scope a consensus of American library procedure in the handling of the classifier's problems. [9, p. 37-38.].

Preparation of the 1928 Code

From 1914 until 1926 very little happened with the *Code for Classifiers*. Part of the reason was financial. 200 copies of the 1914 mimeograph were printed by the University of Illinois and the Newberry Library supplied the cover freely. No financial sponsor for a new edition of the *Code* emerged. Phineas Windsor wrote Merrill on May 3, 1915: "I hope you will not become at all discouraged over the slowness of the progress on the *Code* nor the lack of appreciation shown it by many librarians." In 1916, Merrill, as Chair, submitted a report to the ALA and noted that the Committee was unable to meet that year due to the difficulty of "assembling the members." [16] Since there were few copies of the 1914 mimeograph left, requests for copies were being sent only to a library nearby and not the individual requesting it. Also in 1916, two new members were added to the Committee: Leticia Gosman, Princeton University Library and Julia Pettee. In the years following, nothing further materialized. Members of the Committee grappled with related classification issues such as the preparation of a key to the *Library of Congress Classification* in terms of the *Decimal Classification* as part of the larger Committee on Classification. Towards the mid 1920s they were also increasingly preoccupied about the relationship between the Committee on Cataloging and the Committee on Classification. Finally, in 1925, when Clement W. Andrews (Librarian, John Crerar Library) was appointed Chairman of the Committee on Classification, the work was reinitiated as a committee priority. Merrill also requested and began to receive the help of Grace O. Kelley, Classifier at John Crerar Library.

But, there were more troubles ahead. In Feb. 1926 Merrill wrote Carl Milam asking for ALA's help in publishing the *Code*. He continued to revise the *Code* getting in touch with Farrar and Fellows to update them on the plans for it's revision, and integrating Kelley's policies and Pettee's classified arrangement. Farrar replied that she preferred the "strictly alphabetical arrangement" and Fellows, still at the New York State Library replied in a letter dated 30 March 1926 that "a cursory examination merely refreshes my former very favorabl impression of the

work, and I shd be most hartily in favor now, as I was then, of it's being printed."

Finally, on Nov. 17, 1926, Merrill heard from Everett O. Fontaine, Assistant to the ALA Secretary. "From the size of the *Code*, we presume that the price of a mimeographed edition would be in the neighborhood of $2.00, and in order to assure publication we should have advance orders for at least 100 copies." Would Merrill prepare "a statement of a circular letter" for ALA to send out with a description of the *Code* and it's use in a Classification Department? Merrill suggested the following introduction: "The new *Code for Classifiers* is out – rearranged, revised and much expanded. It is by William Stetson Merrill of the Newberry Library. As a text book for class use it is unique in it's field."

Merrill describes the 1928 *Code* thus:

Two general questions confront every classifier of books. The first is: what is this book about? The second is: where will this book best be classed? The first question always arises; the second arises when the book might seem to go with equal propriety in one of two places, or even in one of several places. Three hundred principles are laid down in the *Code* for determining the procedure to be followed in such questions of doubt. Reasons are given pro and con. The aim of the book is aid the classifiers, or many classifiers on a large staff, in preserving consistency in their work rather than to dictate the procedure.

Figure 3 is an exact reproduction from the 1928 *Code* of one of the principles that was also in the 1914 *Code* (and shown above as Figure 2). It is now Rule 178 and is arranged in a section labeled ARTS (FINE ARTS) with the *DDC* class number 700. Rule 177 provides the class definition and scope.

Reaction to the 1928 Code

Requests for copies of the 1928 *Code* came from as far away as Russia, Imperial Library, Japan, and Norway. A Russian Professor of Library Science wrote Merrill congratulating him on the *Code* and asked how works of Leo Tolstoi should be classified. Charles Martel, who had worked with Merrill at the Newberry, was at this time helping with the Vatican Library cataloging rules, on leave from his home in-

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ART (FINE ARTS)   Dewey No. 700

177   Definition and scope of this class
  The term art as used by the classifications is restricted to the "fine arts." Both the fine arts and the practical arts deal with the methods of putting into concrete form ideas which are practically useful or esthetically pleasing to man, and the line between the two cannot be very sharply drawn. The fine arts cover the material relating to sculpture, the graphic arts, drawing, design, painting, carving, engraving, architecture, and the decorative arts.- (Pettee).

178   Animals in art.

  Class in art, not in sociology

  The works treating of these topics give little information, even at their   fullest, about animals as such; but tell how they are viewed and represented as subjects of art, and explain their significance and symbolism.

Figure 3: Entries from the 1928 Code [4], p. 67.

stitution, the Library of Congress [32]. When he read the announcement of the *Code*'s forthcoming publication, Martel wrote to Merrill from the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in Rome: "Please reserve two copies for me … I want them for personal use." Margaret Mann, University of Michigan Library School professor, who had also just published her book, *Classification And Cataloging Of Books* reviewed Merrill's *Code* and also wrote him in December: "I am certainly glad to have your new *Code for Classifiers*. The mimeograph edition has always been of great help to me … So many students think that classification is merely Dewey numbers, and your text will show them how much reasoning has to be done before the correct subject matter can be detected and before the classification scheme is understood. Please accept my congratulations for an excellent piece of work."

ALA Publications had compelled Merrill to show proof of 'orders in hand' before they would publish the 1928 edition. Now, in Jan. 1929, Emily V.D. Miller, Editor of Publications, ALA, wrote with enthusiasm, "You will remember we printed 2000 copies of this book and bound half of this number. It is with gratification that we are ordering the remaining copies bound this week, as the first thousand have been sold out. It now looks as if the book would have to be reprinted before another year is out."

Unfortunately, the 1928 *Code* had it's critics and two of them were particularly troublesome: The Rev. Colman Farrell (Abbey Library, St. Benedict's College, Aitchison, Kansas) felt that "quotations from Pettee in the code are exceedingly misleading for Catholic classifiers" and, Dorcas Fellows (now *DDC* Editor) objected strongly to the use of the *DDC* class numbers for arrangement of the rules and prin-

ciples. Fellows' objections were the more serious since they resulted in a variant edition printed in 1929 in which Merrill removed many of the *DDC* class numbers (discussed below in the section on Conceptual Differences).

Preparation of the 1939 Code

In 1936 Everett O. Fontaine, Chief, Publishing Department, ALA, wrote to Merrill, "The book continues to sell from 200 to 250 copies a year. The question arises as to what you think of the need for a new edition." Thus began the work for the revision of the 1939 edition of the *Code*. Merrill began the work for the 1939 edition in relative isolation. Living on a pension, in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, he was forced to rely on the graciousness of the professionals in the Newberry Library, Library of Congress, and elsewhere. Nevertheless, he was as meticulous as before, making trips to Chicago to the Newberry and John Crerar Library to identify current classifying practices, borrowing LC cards, using old friends at LC to analyze changes, noting changes, comparing rules in the 1928 code, and finally preparing a survey of classifying practices.

The survey was finalized in May 1937, two years before the second edition of the *Code* was printed. In the survey letter to be sent to libraries Merrill wrote,

The steady sale during the nine years since its publication in 1928, of from 200 to 250 copies a year, has nearly depleted the supply of books in stock." He told his readers that he was retired from active library work" and offered the following explanation as a need for a new *Code*.

"The reason for preparing a new edition as against issuing a plain reprint lies in the opportunity so afforded to incorporate rulings to fit new problems of classification that may have arisen in the past ten years. New subjects and new modes of treating old subjects present new problems to the classifier. As the Code has been used by teachers and students of classification as well as by classifiers in libraries, the value of keeping it up to date is obvious."

He requested notes, principles, and rules on the following questions:

– Do you class works on Fascism together, dividing geographically by the country concerned? Or do you class them with other works on the present form of government of the respective countries – e.g., Germany, Italy?
– Do you treat present-day Communism as an economic theory of society? Or do you treat it as a form of political government?
– Do you treat the "alphabetical" administrations of the Federal Government – AAA, PWA, CCC – as phases of the government as a whole?
– Recent trends in Science and in Philosophy have introduced many new ways of viewing things. Have you met any specific instances where classification practice has been affected? If so, will you name them?

He was punctilious about offering to give credit: "Due credit will be given to any library or to any classifier whose rulings on case of alternative modes of handling materials are incorporated in the new edition." He did not forget to set a deadline for feedback, Sept. 1, 1937. Nor did he forget to describe the purpose of the *Code*: "While the *Code* is a norm of consistent practice, it contains so many references to divergent rulings as to be, in a way, a cooperative enterprise to which you are invited to contribute."

ALA mailed out 100 letters and Merrill kept careful track of the replies he received from approximately 30 of them and acknowledged them in the Foreword to the 1939 edition. Arnold H. Trotier, Chairman of the ALA Committee on Cataloging and Classification reviewed Merrill's 1939 manuscript along with Eleanor Robertson, Assistant Catalog Librarian and Esther Anell, Serials Reviser. Besides adding new rules, the 1939 edition completely discarded the *DDC* class numbers (Trotier felt that "many classifiers will object to the change") and eliminated references to the 1926 survey. Instead under rules and principles it notes the broad class number for both *LC* and *DDC*.

Figure 4 is an exact reproduction from the 1939 *Code* of the same principle that was also in the 1914 *Code* and in the 1928 *Code* (shown above as Figure 3). It is now Rule 228 and is arranged in a section labeled ART. FINE ARTS.

ART. FINE ARTS

177   **Definition and scope of this class**
  "The term art as used by the classifications is restricted to the 'fine arts.' Both the fine arts and the practical arts deal with the methods of putting into concrete form ideas which are practically useful or esthetically pleasing to man, and the line between the two cannot be very sharply drawn. The fine arts cover the material relating to sculpture, the graphic arts, drawing, design, painting, carving, engraving, architecture, and the decorative arts."-(Pettee).

228   **Animals in art.**
  Class in art, not in zoology.

  The works treating of these topics give little information, even at their fullest, about animals as such; but tell how they are viewed and represented as subjects of art, and explain their significance and symbolism.
  L.C. classes animals in art as a topic under the several fine arts; D.C. classes painting of animals (758) under art, and symbolical representations (246.5) under ecclesiology.
  Distinguish pictures of animals for educational purposes to be classed under the kind of animal, from the work of artists in which the animals are features of the painting or drawing.

Figure 5. Entries from the 1939 Code [5], p. 101-102

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Differences Between the Various Editions of the Code

In this part of the paper, significant variations between the *Code* and what the differences represent are analyzed. First are bibliographical or physical differences; next are differences in the nature and use of attributions, third are conceptual differences. Finally there are contextual differences.

Bibliographical Differences

Table 1 documents the observable differences between the four texts of the *Code*. The sub-title in the 1914 mimeographed edition of the *Code* is different from the first and second editions; the sub-title "A Collection of Data Compiled for Use of the Committee By William Stetson Merrill, Chairman" makes clear that what is being presented to the readers is a collection of data and not yet a set of principles for classifying. Besides the usual title and attributions, the cover page carries "200 copies mimeograph" and

a quotation from Pope, indicating one of the main general principles for classifying: "In every work regard the author's end." The 1914 edition has no table of contents or a back-of-the book index; it is 124 pages long and the 285 rules are arranged alphabetically in two sections that follow the style of Merrill's 1912 lectures: the One–topic book and the Two-topic Book. Merrill is the copyright holder and there is a one-page Preface in which he thanks the members of the Committee. The names of the seven members of the committee and their affiliations are listed on a separate page. Merrill dedicated the first and second editions to his second wife, Ethel Eliott Owen. The later two editions, 1928 and 1939, have a new sub-title, a Table of Contents and an Index. Instead of the Preface, they have a Foreword and the ALA is the copyright holder. The variant 1928 edition (printed in 1929) carries the following statement on the verso of the title page: "The *Code for classifiers* has been endorsed by the Committee on Cataloging and Classification of the American Library Association." (see also Table 1 and Figures 5, 6, 7)

Table 1: Bibliographical details and differences

	1914	1928	1929 (v)	1939
Title	A Code for Classifiers	Code for Classifiers		Code for Classifiers
Sub-title	A Collection of Data Compiled for the Use of the Committee	Principles governing the consistent placing of books in a system of classification		Principles governing the consistent placing of books in a system of classification
Creator	William Stetson Merrill	N/A		N/A
Editor		Merrill		Merrill
Edition	Mimeograph	First edition		2nd edition
Publication/Printing Date	May 1914	Nov. 1928		October 1939
Foreword	Preface written by Merrill dated April 27, 1914, Newberry Library, Chicago	Foreword written by Merrill dated May 1, 1928		Foreword written by Merrill dated April 1, 1939 Oconomoc, Wisconsin
Publisher	ALA	ALA		ALA
Printer	Unknown	-		-
Size	124 p	128 p.		177 p.
Number of copies (by 1954)	200 printed	4111 sold		5443 sold
Dedication	None	To wife		To wife
Components	Has Preface Has copyright No Table of Contents No Index	Has Foreword Has Table of Contents Has Index	+ Statement of ALA Endorsement	Has Foreword Has Table of Contents Has Index

The 1929 variant is almost the same as 1928 edition with the one addition noted.

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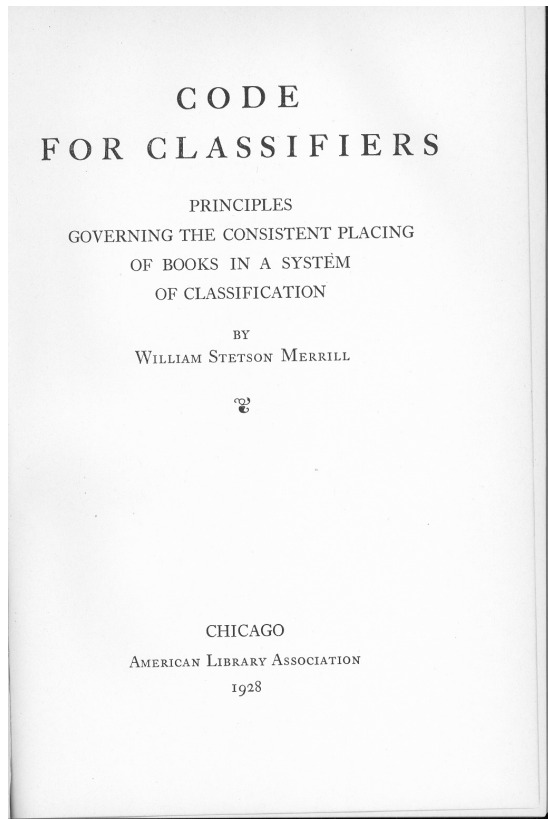A. S. Coleman: A *Code for Classifiers*: Whatever Happened to Merrill's Code?

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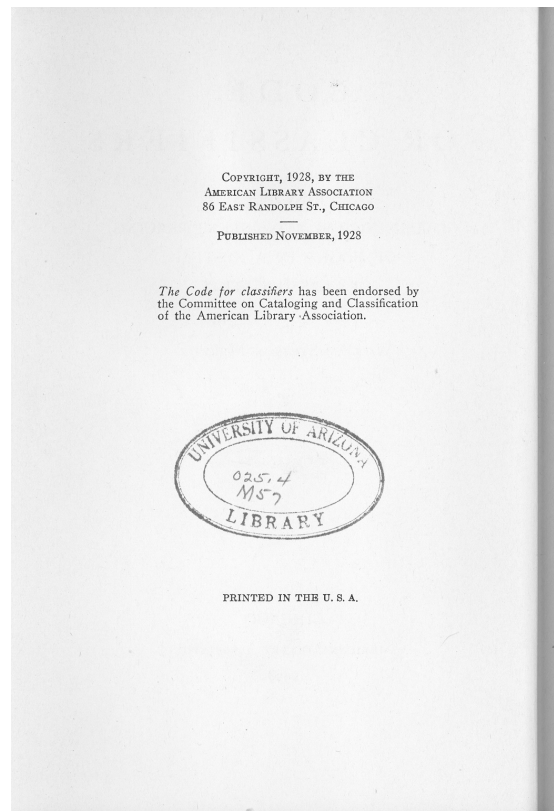*Figure 5: Title page of 1928 Edition (published November 1928)*

Figure 7: Verso of Title page of 1928 edition, 1929 variant. Note the endorsement statement.
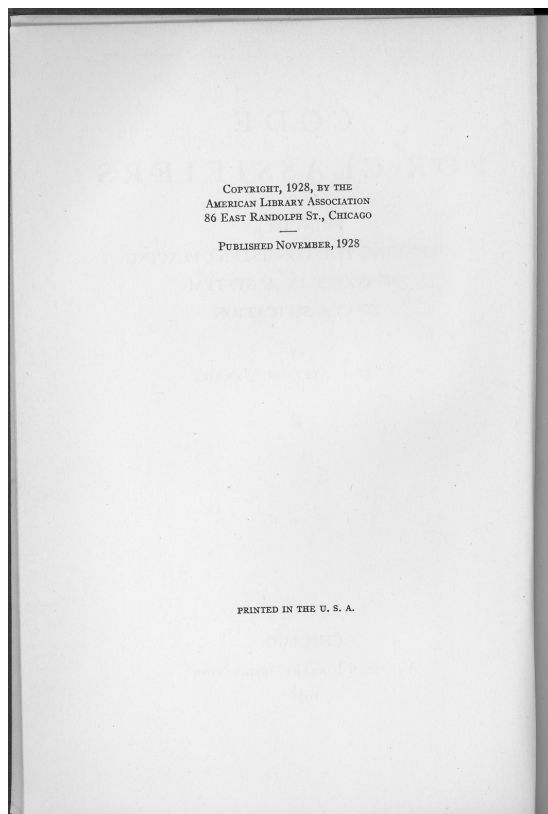
Figure 6: Verso of Title page of 1928 edition

Attribution Differences

Merrill's concern for attribution and his meticulousness in carrying it out is evident in the texts and is also corroborated by the correspondence papers in the two archives. There seem to be two patterns in his acknowledgements of attribution. The first type of attributions may be called 'collaborators." These people actively participated in the development of the principles and rules or served on the Committee. Their names are given in Table 2 and I have tried to preserve the roles that Merrill acknowledged for them. The second type of attributions is confined to the 1939 edition. It includes those librarians/libraries that completed the 1936 survey that was sent out; or in some other way indicated that they subscribed to the principles, did not subscribe to them, or used them in a modified way. These libraries are listed in Table 2, while names of the people are given in Table 3. Academic, public, state, and research libraries and library schools are represented.

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Table 2: Attribution Differences

Acknowledgements in Foreword (by order of appearance)

Role given in italics

1914	1928	1939
Members of the committee	❖ *Annotater*, Pettee, Julia	**Participants**
1) J.C. Bay, John Crerar Library	❖ *Practice*, Fellows, Dorcas	❖ Pettee, Julia
2) Walter C. Biscoe, NY State Library, Albany	❖ *Critic*, Farrar, Ida F.	❖ Fellows, J. Dorkas
3) W.P. Cutter, Library of the Engineering Societies, NY	❖ *Science & Technology Rulings*, Kelley, Grace O.	❖ Farrar, Ida F. Kelley, Grace Osgood
4) J.C.M. Hanson, University of Chicago Library	❖ *Sponsor of Code*, Windsor, P.	❖ Windsor, P. L
5) Charles Martel, LC, Washington	❖ *Sponsor of Code*, Bay, J.C.	❖ Bay, J. C.
6) Wm. Stetson Merrill, Chairman, Newberry, Chicago	❖ *Counsel*, Utley, G. B.	❖ Utley, G. B
7) P.L. Windsor, Urbana		❖ Fontaine, Everett O.
		❖ Akers, Susan Grey
		❖ Ansell, Esther
		❖ Hansen, Camellia
		❖ Hastings, Charles H.
		❖ Pitt, Laud R.
		❖ Perley, Clarence W.
		❖ Getchell, Myron W.
		❖ Haykin, David Judson
		❖ Pressey, Julia C.
		❖ Penfield, Harriet E.
		❖ Foote, Frances F.
		❖ Radtke, Elizabeth S.
		❖ Conway, James H.
		❖ Wife

Table 3: Attribution Differences

Type and Name of Libraries
Contributing to the 1939 Code

Type of Library	*Name of Library*
Public	Public Library of the City of Boston
	Public Library of Cincinnati
	Indianapolis Public Library
	Los Angeles Public Library
	Queen's Borough Public Library
Academic	University of California Library
	Columbia University Library
	Franklin and Marshall College Library
	Harvard College Library
	University of Illinois Library
	Iowa State College Library
	University of Nebraska Library
	Princeton University Library
	Syracuse University Library
	Temple University – Sullivan Memorial Library
	Wesleyan University – Olin Library

Type of Library	*Name of Library*
Library Schools	University of Michigan – Dept. of Library Science
	University of North Carolina – School of Library Science
	Pratt Institute – School of Library Science
Research	John Crerar Library
	Library of Congress
	Newberry Library
State	New York State Library

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Conceptual Differences

There are at least five conceptual differences among the three editions and the 1929 variant of the *Code* and they are listed below. The first two are explicitly stated overarching general principles of the *Code* while the next three reflect the presentation, arrangement, and coverage of the principles for classifiers. The conceptual differences resulted in changes that reflect Merrill's attempt to resolve the public and private controversies that emerged with each appearance of the successive editions of the *Code*. The conceptual differences are:

– 1) Classifying vs. classification
– 2) Intent of the author
– 3) Use of Dewey Decimal class numbers
– 4) Arrangement of rules
– 5) Subject Coverage

Each of these differences is discussed further below and Table 4 provides a summary view.

Table 4: Conceptual Differences

	1914	**1928**	**1939**
Number of rules	285	300	365
Arrangement of rules	Two sections: One-topic book and Two-topic book Alphabetical within each section	General principles Classified arrangement within 'special subjects'	General Principles Classified arrangement within 'special subjects'
General Principles	❖ Classifying vs. classification ❖ Intent of the author ❖ Treatment of one subject vs. more than one subject ❖ Close classification ❖ Modification	1. Classification of books 2. Intent of the author 3. Choice of subjects 4. Kinds of classification 5. Purpose of classification 6. Modification for special needs	1. Definition (classification) 2. Principle of classification (permanently useful) 3. Characteristics chosen (subject) 4. Intent of the author 5. Close classification 6. Modification for special needs
Use of Class Numbers	No	Dewey class numbers (7th edition)	DDC and LC
Examples	Sparse	Yes	Yes
Annotations	Yes	Yes	Yes
Notes	No	Yes	Yes

Classifying vs. Classification

In all the versions Merrill makes a clear distinction between classifying and classification. In doing so, he introduced the first controversial feature of the *Code*, but also paved the way for later classification theorists like Bliss and Ranganathan.

> Classification of books differs from classification of knowledge. The latter is the science of drawing up a scheme or system in which the various subjects of human inquiry, or human life in its varied aspects, are grouped according to their likenesses or relations to one another. Classification of books, on the other hand, while making use of a scheme of knowledge, may be considered as the art of assigning books to their proper places in a system of classification. (3, p. 4).

Authorial Intention

In the 1928 edition and the 1929 variant of the *Code*, the classifier is instructed to determine the intent of the author with regard to subject. In the 1939 edition, this principle is moved to become the fourth

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general principle. This is the second controversial feature of the *Code*. Many librarians of the time found it difficult to agree with author intent as a classifying principle. As early as the first, 1914 edition, Dorcas Fellows had disagreed with this principle: "It is true that I agreed with Mr. Wyer as to the over-emphasis laid on the "intent of the author.""

Use of Dewey Decimal *class numbers*

In the 1928 edition Merrill introduced the Dewey class numbers. This was the third controversial feature of the *Code*. As a result of the controversy, ALA issued a variant of the 1928 edition in 1929. This differed from the 1928 edition in that the *DDC* numbers were removed. As mentioned above and shown in Figure 7, the 1929 variant also carried the ALA endorsement statement.

The strongest critic of the *Code* turned out to be Dorkas Fellows; in her correspondence with Merrill we see different names: Jennie D. Fellows, Dorcas Fellows, and finally Dorkas Fellows, the name used henceforth and by which she is generally known. When the 1914 edition was published and even in 1926 when Merrill wrote her with his new revisions and plans for the *Code*, Fellows who was the Classifier at the NY State Library was warmly approving of the *Code*. However, soon after, she left to become the Editor of the *Dewey Decimal Classification*. With the move to establish *DDC* in the political capitol of librarianship, she moved with the *DDC* Editor's Office to the Library of Congress, Washington. At this time, the *DDC* manuals gave little help to the classifier in making their decisions, and one might speculate that some of the enthusiasm for the *Code* with its inclusion of DC numbers arose because of this. Nevertheless, in a 4-page typewritten letter dated 8 June 1929, Fellows objected strongly basing it on how she and others in the *DDC* office saw the *Code* with its numbers as:

> To those not familiar with D.C. the *Code*'s use of D.C. numbers is likely to produce a very misleading and derogatory impression of the system. Frequently a topic is given a D.C. number and then followed by a direction to class the material elsewhere, and very often this 'elsewhere' is exactly where D.C. would class it, but D.C. number printed in *Code* implies that that is number which D.C would use, and sometimes thereby presents D.C. in an absurd light. An illustration of this point is the one

mentioned by Miss Mann in her review of the *Code* i.e. 913 Antiquities, the only topic given under it being Historic houses. A book on what is ordinarily meant by Historic houses might be clast in local history, in description, in biography (if dealing with lives of its past or present occupants) or in architecture, but certainly not in 913 Antiquities.

Merrill responded:

> You say that the "D.C. number printed in the *Code* implies that that is the number which D.C. would use?" What ground have you for inferring that when I say definitely that it is only the sequence of topics that is concerned? The instances that you adduce of incongruities would imply, moreover, that after the years of pains I took to give "principles governing the consistent placing of books", I suddenly forgot every principle of consistency.

But, he failed to convince Fellows and he worked with Fellows to delete the most objectionable of the numbers. Merrill's letter dated August 23, 1929 detailed the eliminations he proposed before a reprint was run off by ALA. He also issued a statement clarifying the function of the *DDC* numbers in the *Code*, the concluding sentence of which reads: "These numbers are not official rulings of the D.C. Office." He revised the Foreword very slightly, and ALA printed this as a new 1928 edition (we refer to it as the 1929 variant), and significantly one that now carried the endorsement of the ALA Committee on Cataloging and Classification on its verso (Figure 5).

Arrangement of rules

The 1914 edition was simply an alphabetical arrangement of the rules; the 1928 and the 1939 editions followed a classified order. This was the direct contribution of Julia Pettee but this was not without controversy either. Librarians like Ida Farrar preferred the alphabetical arrangement.

Subject Coverage

The Newberry Library had increasingly become a Humanities library and Merrill realized that he did not have good coverage of science and technology rules in his 1914 edition; therefore, he requested and received the support of Grace Kelley, Classifier at

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John Crerar Library, who worked with him to improve the science sections. Thus, the 1928 and 1939 editions were expanded beyond the primarily humanities focus of the 1914 edition. They included rulings for Science and Technology subjects and the correspondence indicates that on some of them Merrill and Kelley worked collaboratively; a majority however came from Kelley and rulings decisions at the John Crerar Library.

Contextual Differences

Some of the changes in the three editions and the 1929 variant reflect the changing context in which Merrill himself worked, as his position changed at the Newberry, as classifications and approaches to indexing came and went at the Newberry, and these immediate contextual differences are sketched. In addition there were other broader contextual factors whose specific influences on Code development are not explored although they are identified and enumerated briefly.

Merrill was Head of Classification at the Newberry Library in Chicago when the 1914 *Code* was printed and John Vance Cheney was the Newberry Librarian along with Alexander J. Rudolph as the Assistant. The Newberry at this time was engaged in a period of technical services innovation; specifically, the Rudolph Indexer (a machine) was to be used instead of the card catalog. Poole's classification was to be abandoned and a new classification scheme used. Merrill who had been in correspondence with Cutter from 1895 until Cutter's death in 1903 was influential in Newberry Library's choice of the Cutter's Classification scheme rather than the *Dewey Decimal Classification* [30, 31]. By the time of the 1928 *Code*, Merrill was Head of Public Services at the Newberry Library and George B. Utley (who was also the President of the American Library Association from 1922-23) was the Newberry Librarian. At the time of the 1939 *Code* Merrill had been retired from active library work for a little over 6 years and he had retired to live in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. Appendix 1 provides a biography of Merrill, the positions that he held, the Newberry Librarians under whom Merrill served and their dates of service at the Newberry, and memberships and associations with whom Merrill was affiliated.

Other contextual factors that probably influenced the Code include: the development and growth of the *Library of Congress Classification* and the *Dewey Decimal Classification* schemes (early 1900s), politics

on the ALA Committees (mid 1910s and 1920s), the sales of the LC printed catalog cards (started in 1910) to which class numbers were added in 1915, and the general perception of a crisis in cataloging (1941) that has been documented in Dunkin's review of cataloging and classification [26].

Current status of the Code

In order to assess current opinion about Merrill's *Code* and to determine what lasting effects it might have had on classificationist ideas and practice 67 texts on classification were examined (ranging in publication date from 1915 until 2003). Merrill's *Code* is not cited by most of them. Only 16 of these mention Merrill but most are in the context of classification Book Numbers [23]. "These so-called Merrill Numbers…[were] used for alphabeting by decimal numbers in other libraries." [9, p. 12] However, classification theorists Bliss [17], Ranganathan [18] and Sayers [19] were all aware of it and the *Code* was translated into Japanese [20] and Spanish [21] and used in library schools inside and outside the US [22]. Today, Merrill and his *Code* appear to be forgotten. In recent years, the only book to mention the *Code* is Hope Olson and John Boll's *Subject Analysis of Online Catalogs* [12]. They acknowledge that the *Code* "represented something of a national consensus" and analyze three sample semantic rules from the code [p. 62].

Olson has also published an important critique on classification in recent years. In *The Power to Name: Locating the Limits of Subject Representation in Libraries* Olson considers library classification and among other things examines Cutter's Rules, the *DDC*, and the *LC Classification*. She recommends movement "*toward eccentric techniques*" as a solution for the problems of marginalizations and exclusions in subject representation systems such as classification schemes [p. 224]. Specifically, she argues for the 1) "options for local definition," which give "primacy" to local histories, and privilege "differences" such as age or ethnic origin [p. 235], and 2) reintroduce the classified catalog, wherein "a general classification might be used as a switching language" [p. 236]. These ideas are very similar to what Merrill's *Code* proposed. In the insistence and the pains taken to encourage and reflect consensual practice in classifying, Merrill's *Code*, if maintained, could have been used to generate an index to classification, the basis for a switching language, needed for truly universal classification. Such a code, because it

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did not prescribe the class number, but rather the principles, may have privileged local definitions and diverse ways of classifying, integrated different traditions, and negated the inherent bias of classification schemes by offering multiple pathways instead of one standardized scheme. Would such pluralism in library classification schemes have created chaos or improved retrieval? Olson is almost the only one who has convincingly argued and presented evidence, on a somewhat large scale, that such pluralism would improve information retrieval.

Conclusion

For studying American library practices in classifying, the *Code* is a work that is worthy of further study. For example, what influence, if any did Merrill's *Code* have on modern classification systems such as the *Dewey Decimal Classification* [24] or on the *Subject Cataloging Manual: Classification* [25], a manual for the application of the *LCC* in specific cataloging situations? Copy cataloging and OCLC have forever changed American libraries; they have made it easier to assign class numbers consistently without recourse to a tool such as the *Code*. Each of the *Codes* was also a product of its time; thus it would be interesting to explore the role and impact of broader contextual factors such as the rise of the documentation movement, with the interest in applying technological solutions to the problems of knowledge organization.

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Appendix 1:
William Stetson Merrill (1866-1969) – Biography

1866	Born in Newton, Mass. (16th Jan.)
1884	Entered Harvard
1888	Graduated AB Harvard
1889	Started at Newberry Library, Chicago

1891	Formal title assigned – Superintendent of the Accessions Dept.
1895	Head of Classification dept.
1896	Married Mary Hancock Allen of Chicago (3 sons)
1918	Head, Public Services Department
1922	Wife dies
1924	Married Ethel Elliott Owen, Chicago Public Library (1 daughter)
1929	Head, Technical Procedure Dept.
1930	Retired from Newberry Library
1930-33	Classifier at John Crerar Library
1966	Merrill Day (100 years old) celebrated at Oconomowoc, Wisconsin
1969	Died in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin (4th April)

Library Positions:

1884-1888	Student assistant, Harvard U Library
1889-1890	Poole's office assistant, Newberry Library
1891-1895	Superintendent of the Accessions Dept.
1895-1917	Head, Classification Department
1918-1928	Head, Public Services Department
1929-1930	Head, Technical Procedure Dept.
1930-1933	John Crerar Library (classifier)

Newberry Librarians under whom Merrill served and their period of service at Newberry (months are noted only when available):

1. Poole, William Frederick (August 1887-March 1894)
2. Cheney, John Vance, (Dec. 1894-1909)
3. Carlton, William Newnham Chattin (July 1909-1920)
4. Utley, George Burwell (April 1920-1942)

Memberships and Affiliations

– American Catholic *Who's Who*, (Merrill served as Advisor)
– American Library Association (life member, multiple appointments)
– American Library Institute
– Bibliographical Society of Chicago (multiple appointments)
– Catholic Converts League (Merrill served as Secretary)
– Catholic Library Association

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– Chicago Library Club (honorary member, multiple appointments)
– Knights of Columbus (honorary life member)
– Ravenswood Musical Club of Chicago (Merrill served as Secretary)

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