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CRITIQUE OF TOPICAL ACCESS

Categorization of Historical Events: comparison of existing techniques and proposal for a redesigned structure

My final masters' project, HumanSaga, is a worldwide web site that can be used to explore history by creating and interacting with dynamic historical timelines. Its foundation is a database of historical events and information, carefully categorized with a variety of metadata. In this case, the main purpose of categorization is collocation – putting together things that belong together. Collocation is particularly important because of the nature of the system. Unlike ordinary information retrieval, where each retrieved item is an independent source of information or meaning, HumanSaga timelines find their meaning in the relationship between events rather than in the events themselves. Timelines can reveal how one event causes another, how one movement leads to another, and what contemporaneous events may influence a person or organization. For this reason, collocation of related items is particularly vital.

So how should we classify the historical events? I searched for different topical categorization structures tailored for the subject domain of history; I hoped to compare different approaches to discover their strengths and weaknesses, as influenced by their original purposes and by the assumptions of their creators – assumptions which might be rooted in nationality, race, or gender, as well as by the characteristics of the collection being categorized. By comparing the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, I hoped to be able to recommend one approach as most appropriate for the categorization of HumanSaga events.

After an extensive search of library resources, the American Society of Indexers, and several university history departments, I was unable to find even a single thesaurus, set of subject headings, or controlled vocabulary designed for the field of history.

I did, however, find thesauri or subject headings for the following fields:

aviation, NASA, gerontology, agriculture, soyfoods and the soybean industry, aquatic sciences and fisheries, art and architecture, medieval iconography, astronomy, finance, biodeterioration, population/family planning, African-American materials, concrete and cement, chemistry, children's materials, urban planning, trade and international finance, conservation, mortgage and consumer credit, criminal justice, cultural development, dentistry, business, economics, education, "exceptional child education", engineering, entomology, fictional characters and places (*two different sets of subject headings!*), forest products, geographic names, hospital literature, and home building.

And that was only A through H.

Failing to find a domain-specific set of history subject headings, I instead looked at portions of general subject headings, including the Library of Congress Subject Headings, Dewey Decimal Classification, and Sears Subject Headings. I also looked at

worldwide web directory structures for history: both general directories (e.g., Yahoo! and Excite) and domain-specific ones (e.g., History Wiz – <http://historywiz.com>). (*See Appendices.*)

Among these various classification systems, there seem to be several specific, characteristic techniques for dividing history. The first is geographic. This is evident in Excite, which divides its structure by continents, and to some extent in History Wiz. Geography seems to be a fairly reasonable top-level distinction, since most cultures throughout history have developed with some degree of isolation. It begins to break down in the modern era, however, when important events and movements cross geographic borders.

A second technique for classifying history is chronological. This is also evident to some degree in History Wiz – the “Ancient Neareast”, “Ancient Civilizations”, “Medieval and Early Modern History” and “Modern History” categories. Excite includes “History By Era” in its structure, although it is only broken down into three broad divisions.

The Dewey Decimal Classification system includes elements of both chronological and geographic categorization. 909.1-909.8 divide all of history since AD 600 into time blocks; history pre-600 is categorized under 930. Sections 940 to 990 include modern (post-600) history, divided first by geography and then by time period.

The third technique for structuring a history categorization is by subject, with the use of subject headings that cut across divisions of place and time. Yahoo!’s subject categories include “Art”, “Books and Printing”, “Food”, “Religion and Spirituality”, and “Science & Technology” – all subjects which are present throughout history in different cultures, different locations, and different eras. Interestingly, Yahoo! also includes top-level categories such as “Assassinations”, “Torture”, “Espionage”, and “Chess”, which might seem of narrower importance; as well as “Industrial Revolution”, “Austro-Hungarian Empire”, and “Ottoman Empire”, topics that are closely tied to a specific place and time.

All three techniques are valid and valuable for providing access to historical information; in different situations, each of them may meet a particular information need. Unfortunately, a single categorization structure cannot meet all of these needs; if the primary division is by geography, then events in the same time period or subject category will be separated from each other.

In order to facilitate all three useful categorization techniques, I propose a faceted categorization structure, with separate facets for geography, chronology, and subject; each event or item will then have a value for each facet, and each facet can be used independently for information access, as appropriate.

Numerous acceptable categorization structures exist for geography and time periods; developing a subject classification is much more troublesome. It is important to provide top-level categories which are truly independent of time and place, and which

represent topics common to all ages and cultures. At lower levels, some categories may be more closely related to times or places. Both Excite and Yahoo! provide fairly good examples.

Yahoo! is a particularly interesting example, since the same category can appear in different locations in the tree; that is, one category can have “multiple parents”. For example, History > By Subject > Prostitution is the same as History > By Subject > Sexuality > Prostitution – and both of them are the same as Society and Culture > Sexuality > Sex Work > Prostitution > History – outside of the “History” structure altogether. I believe that this provides a real benefit in ease of access. It allows like objects to be categorized together (collocation, our main goal), and it allows access to the entire category from different parts of the directory tree. This allows users with different mental models to find the information, and subcategories that cross boundaries need not be divided. I recommend the use of multiple parents in the design of a subject classification system.

A preliminary outline of a recommended subject classification system can be found in Appendix 7.

Appendix 1: History Categories from the Library of Congress Subject Headings

Library of Congress Subject Headings, 14th edition. Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1991.

Appendix 2: History Categories from the Dewey Decimal Classification (excerpts)

Dewey Decimal Classification and Relative Index, 20th edition. John P. Comaromi, ed. Albany, New York: Forest Press, 1989.

Appendix 4: History Categories from the Sears List of Subject Headings

Sears List of Subject Headings, 12th edition. Barbara M. Westby, ed. New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1982.

Appendix 4: History Categories from Yahoo! (excerpts)

Home > Arts > Humanities > History > By Subject

Categories

- * Art
- * Assassinations
 - > [19 names]
- * Austro-Hungarian Empire
 - > Hapsburgs
- * Books and Printing
- * Chess
- * Disasters
 - > Airplane crashes
 - > Earthquakes
 - > Great Irish Famine
 - > Hurricanes, Typhoons, and Tropical Cyclones
 - > Oil Spills
 - > Shipwrecks
 - > Ukrainian Famine
- * Economic History
- * Entertainment
 - > Books and Printing
 - > Comic Books
 - > Fashion
 - > Magic
 - > Movies and Film
 - > Music
 - > Radio
 - > Theater
- * Espionage
- * Exploration
 - > Explorers
 - > > [156 names]
 - > Space
 - > > Astronauts
 - > > > [43 names]
 - > > Space Race
 - > > > Soviet Space Program
 - > > > U.S. Space Program
- * Fashion
- * Food
- * History of the Family
- * Industrial Revolution
- * Labor
- * Legal
- * Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals
- * Maritime History
- * Media History
- * Military History
- * Mughal Empire
- * Ottoman Empire
- * Philosophy
- * Prostitution

- * Psychology
- * Religion & Spirituality
 - > Biblical Archaeology
 - > Catholic Inquisition
 - > Christian
 - > Classical Mythology
 - > The Crusades
 - > Islamic
 - > Jewish
 - > Norse Mythology
 - > People
 - > Witch Hunts
- * Royalty
 - > British
 - > French
 - > Genealogy
 - > Habsburgs
 - > Hawaiian
 - > Japanese
 - > Roman Emperors
 - > Russian
 - > Spanish
- * Science and Technology
 - > Automotive
 - > Computers and Internet
 - > History of Television
 - > Medicine
 - > Science
 - > Trains and Railroads
- * Sexuality
- * Slavery
- * Sports
 - > African American
 - > Athletes
 - > Auto Racing
 - > Baseball
 - > Basketball
 - > Football (American)
 - > Golf
 - > Horse Racing
 - > Ice Hockey
 - > Lacrosse
 - > Museums and Halls of Fame
 - > Olympic Games
 - > Rugby
 - > Soccer
 - > Softball
 - > Triathlon
 - > Women
- * Torture
- * Women's History

Appendix 5: History Categories from Excite.com (excerpts)

Directory

Education

Arts & Humanities

History

- Africa
- Asia
- Australia & Oceania
- Europe
- History by Era
 - Ancient
 - Middle Ages
 - Renaissance
- History by Subject
 - Art History
 - Clothing & Fashion
 - Computer
 - Economics
 - Exploration
 - Food & Cooking
 - Literature
 - Maritime
 - Medicine
 - Military
 - Military History & Wars
 - Movies
 - Music
 - Religion
 - Science & Technology
 - Television
 - Theater
 - Women
- History for K-12
- Latin America
- Middle East
- Military History & Wars
- North America
- Reference
- United States

Appendix 6: History Categories from History Wiz (<http://historywiz.com/>)

- * World History
 - o Genocide
 - + Armenian Genocide
 - + Armenian Genocide Multimedia Exhibit
 - + Executions
 - + Deportation
 - + Victims
 - + Armenia Genocide: Sleeping on the Street
 - + Death By Disease
 - + Death By Starvation
 - + Armenian Genocide Statistics
 - + The Results
 - + Ukraine Famine
 - + The Terror Genocide
 - + Death by Starvation
 - + Reasons Behind the Famine
 - + Grain Seizures
 - + Eyewitnesses
 - + Grain Memorandum
 - + Josef Stalin
 - + Cambodian Genocide
 - + Cambodian Genocide Exhibit
 - + Cambodian Genocide: Khmer Rouge
 - + Cambodian Genocide: Phnom Penh
 - + Cambodia Multimedia 4
 - + Cambodian Genocide: Evacuation
 - + Cambodian Genocide: Empty Phnom Penh
 - + Cambodian Genocide: Forced March
 - + Cambodian Genocide: Forced Labor
 - + Cambodian Genocide: Mass Graves
 - + Holocaust
 - + Holocaust Exhibit
 - + Mein Kampf
 - + The Nuremberg Laws
 - + Humiliation in the Classroom
 - + Anti-Semitic Propaganda
 - + Kristallnacht
 - + Hitler's Speech to the Reichstag
 - + The Warsaw Ghetto
 - + The Concentration Camp
 - + The Final Solution
 - + The Holocaust Chronology
 - + Rwandan Genocide
- o Ancient Neareast
- o World Religions
 - + Hinduism
 - + Buddhism
 - + Taoism
 - + Confucianism
 - + Judaism

- + Christianity
- + Islam
- o Ancient Civilizations
 - + Ancient Egypt
 - + Ancient Greece
 - + History Wiz Recommended Reading List of Ancient Greek Literature
 - + Ancient Rome
 - + Roman Literature
- o Medieval & Early Modern History
 - + Ancient America
 - + Medieval Europe
 - + Exploration
- o Modern History
 - + The French Revolution
 - + Did You Know?
 - + Age of Imperialism
 - + World War One
 - + Great War Exhibit
 - + Causes of the Great War
 - + Assassination
 - + The Alliance System
 - + Off to War
 - + The Defensive War
 - + Trench Warfare
 - + Over the Top
 - + No Man's Land
 - + Staggering Loss of Life
 - + Great War Propaganda
 - + World War One Aviation
 - + The Red Baron
 - + The Sinking of the Lusitania
 - + Notice of Warning
 - + American Doughboys
 - + Zimmerman Telegram
 - + Zimmerman Telegram Translation
 - + Dulce et Decorum Est
 - + Wilfred Owen's War Poetry
 - + The Tank
 - + World War II
 - + Nazi Propaganda Exhibit
 - + The Power of Propaganda
 - + The Propaganda Film
 - + The Aryan Race
 - + Nazi Youth
 - + The Totalitarian State
 - + Radio Broadcasts
- o Africa
 - + South Africa
- o India and South Asia
- o Russia & Eastern Europe
- o China
 - + Imperialism in China Multimedia
 - + Qing Dynasty
 - + The Forbidden City
 - + Chinese Exports
 - + Balance of Trade

- + The Opium Problem
- + Opium Imports
- + The Opium Wars
- + Boxer Rebellion
- + A Helpless Giant
- + The Last Emperor
- + Nanjing Massacre
 - + Nanjing Massacre Exhibit
 - + Japanese Troops Enter Nanjing
 - + The Massacre of Civilians
 - + Bayonet Practice
 - + 10,000 Corpse Ditch
 - + Japanese Soldier Showing Off
 - + Chinese Victims
- o Latin America
 - + Latin America Imperialism
 - + Latin America Imperialism Exhibit
 - + The Monroe Doctrine
 - + Spanish American War
 - + War in Cuba
 - + Philippine American War
 - + Big Stick Diplomacy
 - + Death in Panama
 - + The Panama Canal
 - + Uncle Sam Plants the Flag
 - o Mythology
- * American History
 - o American Revolution
 - o Slavery
 - + The Slave
 - o United States Civil War
 - o Spotlight
 - o Spotlight
 - o a-industrialization.htm
 - o The Cold War
 - + The Cold War Exhibit
 - + The Yalta Conference
 - + The Berlin Wall
 - + The Arms Race
 - + The Cuban Missile Crisis
 - + Race to the Moon
 - o Civil Rights Movement
 - o History and the Constitution

Appendix 7: Proposed Subject Classification System (Preliminary Outline)

- > Art, Music, and Literature
 - > Visual Arts
 - > Drama & Theater
 - > Film
 - > Television
 - > Literature
 - > Music

- > Economics
 - > Agriculture
 - > Labor
 - > Slavery
 - > Industrial Revolution

- > Exploration & Discovery
 - > Space Exploration

- > Fashion and Clothing

- > Military History and Wars
 - > Espionage

- > Law

- > Politics and Government

- > Philosophy

- > Religion
 - > Christian
 - > Roman Catholic
 - > Protestant
 - > Eastern Orthodox
 - > Jewish
 - > Islamic
 - > Classical Mythology
 - > Norse Mythology

- > Science & Technology
 - > Medicine
 - > Transportation

- > Sports