The Representation of Comics by the Library of Congress Subject Headings

While the topic of comics is outlined somewhat accurately by the subject headings designated by the Library of Congress, these are by no means comprehensive or without their faults. Deficiencies in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) classification system are further exacerbated by libraries' misuse of the developed controlled vocabulary. In documenting the effectiveness of LCSH's classification of information pertaining to comics, I will analyze three areas of its use in conceptual order following an introduction of the topic: terminology in the professional literature and society, the hierarchy of terminology in LCSH, and the use of Library of Congress subject headings in library catalogues.

Over the course of the better part of the twentieth century – and now the twenty-first century – the term "comics" has come to represent what venerated writer and artist, Will Eisner coined in the mid-1980s as "sequential art." Despite the composition of the art form itself, be it serial publication, bound collection or anthology, graphic novel, or digital production, among others, works falling under the umbrella of sequential art have been consistently identified as comics. Elaborating on Eisner's definition, Scott McCloud asserted that comics are "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."[1] Comics by this definition can include works such as information graphics, fine art, animation, and picture books; however, the most prominent form of comics, and that to which I will refer for the purpose of this analysis, is that which has traditionally framed a visual narrative via successive panels of various shapes and sizes that are employed in representing space and time. What is important to note is the centrality of the visual

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[1] McCloud, Scott, *Reinventing comics* (New York: Paradox Press, c2000), 9.

element of the medium. While often produced in conjunction with the written word, it is the pictures that are the essential force of the art form, without which it would not exist.

Closer analysis of the terminology of the field reveals that, although largely unquestioned by the professionals themselves, it is rife with ambiguities, inaccuracies, and inconsistencies. It is important to possess an understanding of these issues in developing an effective classification system of subject headings for comics. I will address three major contentions with this terminology which will aid in elucidation of the subtle imprecisions of the hierarchical structure of LCSH on this topic: the nature of the word "comic," the difference between "comics" and "graphic novels," and the popular usage of common synonyms.

First, a cause of common misperception of the art form is inherent in the word "comic" itself. By definition, it suggests an element of humour. This has aided in perpetuating the stereotype that comics are generally limited to the "funny pages" of a newspaper, or quaint, simplistic, and light-hearted children's entertainment. While the term is historically rooted in these initial forays of the medium, quite the contrary, the majority of comics today are intended for, and consumed by, a mature audience. "Comics" has come to represent works that fall under the above-established definitions of sequential art. I will further discuss the implications of these misperceptions later on as they pertain directly to the broader terms assigned to the primary subject heading **Comic books, strips, etc.** in LCSH.

Second, while the term "comics" is misleading in its latent ambiguity, "graphic novels" has developed as an inaccurate synonym for the former. With the growing popularity of comics over the past decade, the term "graphic novel" has been elevated and perpetuated by book stores and libraries, presumably as a means of product placement, while attempting to garner a fresh,

unbiased audience. If the term "comics" wasn't inaccurate enough, albeit acceptably ingrained, "graphic novels" has imposed an unnecessary second layer of misrepresentation. The term not only restricts the art form to works of fictitious narrative, but also to a particular bound format. The majority of comics do not fit into this mold. This is further complicated by the fact that comics tend to be catalogued as if of a genre or format independent of other media. Rather than collocated with biographies, Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* can be found in the graphic novels section of most public libraries. Rather than collocated with books on World War II, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is generally found in the same graphic novels section. Comics is not a genre like biographies, nor is it a format like books. Rather, comics is an artistic medium like the written word, or film. It can take the form of many genres and formats, and is never limited to any one.

Third, while the popularized term "graphic novels" has achieved its presumed objectives of establishing a wider audience and alleviating the stigmatization of the medium, it has also generated a rift between this new popular culture audience and the pre-"graphic novels" audience. Furthermore, the creators themselves – including writers, artists, pencillers, inkers, colourists, letterers – generally adhere to the pre-existing terminology. Not only has the development of the term "graphic novels" established its own further misconceptions of the medium, but segregated the field, creators from audience, which was once largely intimate and of a similar mentality. One need only observe the world's largest comic convention, San Diego Comic Con, to understand that popular culture in the form of movies, video games, and technology has preponderated over the medium for which the event was designed and named.

Having established a basic understanding of comics and the use of terminology in the field, I will now examine how LCSH has employed this language and whether or not it has done so effectively and accurately in representing the resources and literature pertaining to the topic. I will analyze the positive aspects of the designated subject headings, ambiguous terminology, the inconsistent hierarchical usage of terms, and the reinforcement of the previously noted stereotype via broader terms. In doing so, I will focus on **Comic books, strips, etc.**, as related terms are virtually non-existent -- "Comics" is a non-preferred term that leads to **Comic books, strips, etc.** and "sequential art" does not exist as a subject heading.

Based on the previously discussed misconceptions and stereotypes, one might presume to observe a less judicious treatment of the topic; however, in describing comics accurately in their multifaceted embodiments, LCSH has, overall, performed the task acceptably. Surprisingly, **Graphic novels** is listed as a narrower term in relation to the primary subject heading, **Comic books, strips, etc.** Perhaps this has occurred serendipitously, as graphic novels is presently the favoured term in popular culture. Although, more likely it is due to the haphazard addition of **Graphic novels** decades after the establishment of the traditional term. To confirm this theory, it would be advantageous, and of great interest, to have access to a chronology of the conception of LCSH terms. It is accurate that **Graphic novels** is listed as a narrower term for **Comic books, strips, etc.**, as the term technically describes a particular format of comics, however, it is most likely that this was unintentional. The majority of narrower terms are also accurately classified, primarily specifying genre, such as **Biographical comic books, strips, etc.**, **Horror comic books, strips, etc.**, and **Science fiction comic books, strips, etc.** Other, similarly accurately collocated narrower terms include specific formats of comics such as **Fotonovelas** and **Webcomics** and specific elements and subjects of comics like **Comic book covers** and **Sex—**

Comic books, strips, etc. The See Also referral of **Comic books, strips, etc.** is additionally practical in its suggestions to further search for resources via the subdivision **Comic books, strips, etc.** under names, titles, headings of other works, and individual comic characters, such as **Bible—Comic books, strips, etc.** and **Snoopy (Fictitious character)**.

A first look at difficulties with the terminology used to classify comics reveals a number of instances of ambiguous language, primarily **Funnies** as a Used For synonym for **Comic books, strips, etc.** and "cartoons" of the broader term **Caricatures and cartoons**. Perhaps the term "funnies" was in popular use in referring to comic strips in the past; however, outside of that context it could just as easily be interpreted as a general reference to jokes, which isn't a far stretch considering the LCSH broader terms, and stereotypes, associated with comics. Perhaps an appropriate alternative term might be "funny strips." More abstruse is the use of the word "cartoon," which has been employed in an approved capacity to describe a style of both illustration and animation by prominent creators of the two media. This is problematic in that the two artistic disciplines share many core qualities and I argue that animation falls under the category of narrower terms for **Comic books, strips, etc.** (of course, in addition to other, more obvious categories such as film) in its adherence to the definition of comics expounded by McCloud.

Another issue with LCSH's treatment of terms related to comics is the inconsistencies within the subject heading hierarchy. While it makes sense that "Manga (Comic books, strips, etc.)" (Japanese comics), "Manhua (Comic books, strips, etc.)" (Chinese comics), and "Manhwa (Comic books, strips, etc.)" (Korean comics) are listed as Used For terms under **Comic books, strips, etc.**, the latter three refer to comics produced within the respectively identified nations.

This raises the question of whether **Western comic books, strips, etc.** should be level with these

Used For terms, or whether the aforementioned three should be listed as narrower terms along

with Western comics. Certainly **Western comic books, strips, etc.** is indeed a narrower term for

Comic books, strips, etc.; however, perhaps the complication arises in further ambiguity – does

manga refer to only comics produced in Japan, or is it also used as a word by Japanese to refer to

comics in general? Should these three terms for comics, therefore, be listed as Used For terms as

well as narrower terms? Does LCSH provide such dualistic accommodation? Furthermore, while

it is noted that **Comic books, strips, etc.** is able to subdivide by geographical location, it is of

value to mention that while **Western comic books, strips, etc.** and Asian comics are listed as

narrower terms and Used For terms, European comics – those that firmly established the medium

as a respectable art form – remain absent.

Finally, perhaps the most significant deficiency in the terms provided by LCSH for

comics is the inaccurate, restricted, and stereotypical broader terms. The broader terms for

Comic books, strips, etc. are **Caricatures and cartoons** and **Wit and humor, Pictorial**. This

essentially suggests that all comics are of an exaggerated or simplistic nature, or that they

possess a humorous quality. The inaccuracy of this statement is profound in that these broader

terms should actually be collocated as narrower terms in relation to **Comic books, strips, etc.**

Caricatures and cartoons are styles – and similarly, wit and humour are genres or subjects – that

may be applied to comics. More appropriate broader terms for comics are sequential art, visual

art, and perhaps even writing. Despite the fact that the written word is not a requirement, or even

staple element, of comics, it is still far more relevant than the current broader terms. It is

unfortunate that sequential art does not exist as a subject heading in LCSH. It is the most apt and

concise term in describing the medium. Perhaps, contrary to my theory about the inclusion of

graphic novels as a Used For term for **Comic books, strips, etc.**, sequential art has been deemed an antiquated descriptor, despite the inception of its presence within under three decades and use extensively and contemporarily in the professional literature. Furthermore, the only reference to "art" within the terms for **Comic books, strips, etc.** is **Comic art paraphernalia**, the only narrower terms of which are **Comic strip character clocks and watches** and **Comic strip character toys**, which are both significantly removed from the visual arts altogether. How is one to find information pertaining to a specific comic artist, theme, style, or work if the subject headings in no way specify this quality that is so fundamental to the art form? The absence of appropriate broader terms perhaps most substantially limits the accessibility to, and functionality of, the topic of comics in LCSH.

While the effectiveness of LCSH is determined in great part by the functionality and accuracy of the terminology associated with a given topic, so the effectiveness of the use of subject headings in library catalogues is dependent on the success of the classification assigned by the Library of Congress. Have libraries benefitted from the classification of comics assigned by LCSH? I surveyed the extensive collection of the Toronto Public Library (TPL) in order to gauge an understanding of their use of Library of Congress subject headings for cataloguing information on the topic. Prior to doing so, I chose three prominent books on the topic with which I was previously familiar and produced suggested subject headings in order to objectively compare with those in use by TPL. For the most part TPL's use of subject headings coincided with both those I generated and those established by LCSH. There were three most notable deviations made by TPL: the absence of art-related subject headings, the presumed audience, and the inconsistency of the use of this classification.

Based on the three selected books, *The Language of Comics*, *Reinventing Comics*, and *Understanding Comics*, subject headings that I generated were "art," "art and technology," "comic art," "comic books," "comics," "graphic novels," "history," and "sequential art." Within the TPL catalogue, the same three books were assigned the following subject headings respectively: **Comic books, strips, etc.—History and criticism** and **Art and literature—History—20th century**; **Comic books, strips, etc.—History and criticism** and **Comic books, strips, etc.—Technological innovations**; and **Comic books, strips, etc.—Juvenile literature**, **Periodicals—Publishing—Juvenile literature**, **Comic books, strips, etc.—Authorship—Comic books, strips, etc.**, and **Cartoons and comics—History and criticism**. I will note that I only included graphic novels for the purpose of the term's preponderance in popular culture. While TPL makes somewhat adequate use of subject headings pertaining to comics, including the modification of those presumably acquired from LCSH (**Periodicals—Publishing—Juvenile literature**, for example, does not exist in LCSH), like LCSH, it bears its own inadequacies. As evidenced here, TPL's only reference to art in the classification of these books is **Art and literature—History—20th century**, an astute recognition eluded by LCSH.

What is perhaps more problematic is the perpetuation of the stereotype that not only comics, but the professional literature pertaining to the topic is intended for children. This assumption of TPL is made evident by the modification of subject headings to indicate the target of a "juvenile" audience. The vocabulary alone utilized by McCloud's previously quoted definition rather disproves this misperception. It is dangerous to categorize an entire art form as intended for any one audience, particularly if that audience is young children. Comics are just as likely to include works containing offensive material (such as sex and violence) as any other

medium, such as film and video games. For this reason alone TPL does not make effective use of subject headings.

Perhaps the greatest deficiency in TPL's use of subject headings for the classification of information related to comics, however, is its inconsistency. While the three selected books did share a single appropriately classified subject heading, **Comic books, strips, etc.—History and criticism**, further exploration into the classification of comics themselves revealed that some works adhere to certain subject headings while others of similar nature and scope do not. For example, *X-Men. Second coming* is assigned no subject headings, *X-men : evolution. Vol. 2* is assigned **Graphic novels—Juvenile fiction.** and **X-men (Comic strip)**, and *X-Men : original sin* is assigned **Wolverine (Fictitious character)—Comic books, strips, etc.** and **X-Men (Fictitious characters)—Comic books, strips, etc.** How is one expected to successfully find all works of a similar nature if the subject headings do not consistently accommodate this basic intended function of the classification system? While it may be argued that the TPL subject headings maintain a basic level of functionality, there is certainly room for improvement. Still, although the TPL catalogue misrepresents these comics – among many others – through inconsistent classification, the three aforementioned books themselves, *The Language of Comics*, *Reinventing Comics*, and *Understanding Comics*, are relatively accurately documented via prescribed subject headings, minus TPL's penchant for appraising questionably presumed audiences.

In a human-error-fraught and information-laden society, it is unrealistic to expect LCSH cataloguers to possess expert knowledge about every topic known to humanity in the development of subject heading classification. It is moreover inefficient for a poorly publically-

funded institution to invest overwhelmingly in the use of such a classification system that is

scarcely recognized by its user base. Having said this, while both the Library of Congress subject

headings for comics and their implementation for the collocation of information resources in

library catalogues have their own oversights, they have proven satisfactory in their ability to

express the general concepts of the topic.

Works cited

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Authority The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) were developed and are maintained by the U.S. Library of Congress (LOC). Purpose LCSH is a controlled vocabulary used for indexing, cataloging, and searching for bibliographic records in library catalogs and electronic databases. Description LCSH covers a wide range of topics, including history, politics, geography, law, economics, and genealogy. Metathesaurus Scope The Metathesaurus representation of LCS\H includes approximately 6,500 biomedical and health-related terms from the Library of Congress Subject Headings, Twelfth Edition. It Essential Library of Congress Subject Headings. Chapter. Chapter. The form of headings is decided by the Policy and Standards Division of the Library of Congress, and you as cataloguer don't have any control over this; individual headings must be used consistently by everyone, both at the local level to ensure efficient retrieval, and across institutions to support the exchange of information and interoperability of catalogues. In selecting headings for individual documents, however, you have much more freedom to do as you think best for your own situation. In this and the following chapter we shall look at how to choose headings in order to represent d