

An Other Subject

a research exploration of "other" in classification systems

WHAT IS CLASSIFICATION?

Classification is the practice of organizing information according to characteristics and relationships. This project outlined and examined examples of three types of classification: **FORMAL** systems, such as bibliographic or medical classifications; **INFORMAL** systems, such as census and education records; and **HUMAN** systems, such as conversational negotiation of genre in music.

WHY CLASSIFY?

We classify to make make sense of a range of things such as books, diseases, or citizens. Classifications may suggest actions such as placement or treatment of those classified.

Case Studies

FORMAL CLASSIFICATION

These are systems designed and maintained by organizations to **reflect an intentional approach to an area of focus.**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) classifies mental disorders based on features and symptoms. The most recent edition of the DSM eliminated some disorders through consolidation. Because the DSM is used to diagnose disorders, it is also used to justify or deny resources to those diagnosed, and changes may impact communities that lose designations.

INFORMAL CLASSIFICATION

These systems **create and maintain categories for data collection purposes** and are not always designed to represent relationships among these data.

Demographic data such as race and ethnicity is collected in different information settings. For example, the terms used to describe India (or those with Indian ancestry) have a peculiar history and remain unclear in many systems. These categories change over time, and it is not always clear who benefits from the collection of this data.

HUMAN CLASSIFICATION

When the standard terms no longer suffice, we **establish new definitions and categories for emerging phenomena** through conversation and practice.

In some communities, such as a group of electronic musicians, genre can be fraught with tension. Creating new forms is central to artistic practice, but genre labels are often resisted as confining. They may be seen as relevant mostly to outsiders in media and marketing.

WHAT IS OTHER?

In an ideal classification system, every item will have a natural place, but **sometimes things defy easy classification.** In the past, these things may have been left classed as "other" or "miscellaneous," but these terms are falling out of favor.

Every system has different motivations. Therefore, the way that challenging items are classified varies. By reviewing the literature and considering examples, I outlined **four primary ways that challenging items are handled in different kinds of systems.** Each has benefits and drawbacks.

Forms of Othering

UP-POSTING

The practice of avoiding "other" by calling something by its broader or more generic term, when the basic identity of the item is understood. This is most common in formal classification systems.

FALSE NAMING

When an item is inadequately understood, it may be falsely named for the convenience of the classifier. This may be seen in all systems and has negative consequences for all parties.

"OTHER"

Generally used as a sub-heading within a broader category, "other" allows an item to be seen as separate from but related to other items. Most common in informal systems now, but may be seen in formal ones as well.

INTENTIONAL AMBIGUITY

Almost exclusively used in human systems, the active avoidance of description or naming may protect complexity and context. Things that remain intentionally ambiguous often exhibit hybridity or multiplicity, or are ephemeral.

WHY DOES OTHER MATTER?

We look to classification systems as representations of the world. These systems often determine allocation of resources, from expansion of library collections to decisions about medical research. When we do not adequately understand what is contained--and what is not contained-- in the categories of our systems, we may make false assumptions about the importance or even the existence of some things. **Knowing what "other" is and where it may be found can help us improve our systems for everyone's benefit.**

Areas of Application

SEARCH

When we search for a thing, we tend to think we know what we are looking for. Up-posting may help us in our search, but false naming will always keep us from our intended destination. Understanding the nature of ambiguous items may help us design better approaches to search.

BROWSE

Browsing helps us discover things when we are not quite certain of what we are looking for. In the case of genres, including music and literature, we may be more open to works that do not fall clearly in predefined categories. How can we use ambiguity to the advantage of those who browse our systems?

Methodology

This research project began with a review of the literature of consequences of classification, including works by J.E. Mai, M. Feinberg, H. A. Olson, G.C. Bowker and S.L. Star.

A series of case studies examined the causes and the consequences of *othering* in various classification systems. Future research could suggest improved approaches to ambiguity in classification.