

## Against the Grain

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# From the University Presses -- Why I Hate the BISAC Codes

Sanford G. Thatcher

*Penn State Press*, [sgt3@psu.edu](mailto:sgt3@psu.edu)

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**American Life Foundation** (<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Generations-Online-in-2009/Generational-Differences-in-Online-Activities/5-Video-downloads-are-now-enjoyed-more-equally-by-young-and-old.aspx?r=1>) concluded that video downloads are now being done equally across all generations. The study suggested that downloadable video not only attracts Generation Y, but non-traditional students and senior citizens feel at ease in using the latest technology due to greater access to the Internet. The survey also suggested that online movie watching has doubled in the past two years which has led to even greater access to books, movies, and video games. The Media Librarian consistently receives requests from both faculty and students to purchase more downloadable multimedia formats.

Opportunities for librarians and technical services staff to explore streaming options on their campus is varied, all of which are intended to satisfy faculty and student requirements. Online access should not replace the physical DVD/VHS format. Streaming serves to supplement in-class viewing, provide a review for exams, eliminate the need for students to wait for the return of a film that is checked out to a different student, and to be easily accessible via the OPAC.

Some faculty will still request delivery of the DVD or video to their classroom because of their familiarity with the physical format. Although online streaming may be the wave of the future, we recognize that it may not be the solution for all libraries and all faculty. Familiarity with physical formats, technophobia, unknown bandwidth, and the availability of educational streaming content all contribute to why some faculty may be hesitant to implement or support streaming in their curriculum. It remains the responsibility of the Media

Librarian to bring the availability of streaming options to the attention of instructors, and to collaborate with faculty to identify and incorporate streaming titles into the curriculum. To meet this demand, we are currently purchasing individual educational titles, as well as subscription collections such as those available from **Films Media Group Films on Demand Master Academic Collection**.

Our partnerships with library staff and teaching faculty are the foundation for our success. We developed a practical approach to provide faculty and students with an affordable digital streaming program. With their ongoing interest and support, we will continue to build the video streaming service at **Indiana University**. We understand that not every library will have the funds to mount an aggressive streaming production service, nor will every faculty member feel at ease with handling digital files. In our case, it has been well-worth the effort. 🌟

## From the University Presses – Why I Hate the BISAC Codes

Column Editor: **Sanford G. Thatcher** (Director, Penn State Press, USB 1, Suite C, 820 N. University Drive, University Park, PA 16802-1003; Phone: 814-865-1327; Fax: 814-863-1408) <sgt3@psu.edu> [www.psupress.org](http://www.psupress.org)

In my column for the December 2009 issue about “**Google 2.0: Still a Mixed Blessing**,” I referred at the end to the criticism that has already been made of **Google’s** decision to use the BISAC codes for identifying books by subject category by, among others, **Geoffrey Nunberg**, who said: “The BISAC scheme is well-suited for a chain bookstore or a small public library, where consumers or patrons browse for books on the shelves. But it’s of little use when you’re flying blind in a library with several million titles, including scholarly works, foreign works, and vast quantities of books from earlier periods.” And I concluded: “**Google’s** decision to employ BISAC codes is yet one more glaring revelation of how skewed the Settlement is toward the interests of trade-book authors and commercial trade-book publishers rather than academic authors and academic presses.”

I want in this article to expand on that critique and demonstrate more fully why the BISAC codes so ill-serve the academic community and the scholarly publishers that support it. At a very general level, it must be said that, just as the interests of the STM journal publishers mainly determine what positions the AAP takes on issues in journal publishing, so too the commercial trade publishers so dominate the AAP’s board that their interests come first whenever new policies are adopted. Scholarly book publishers (not including here college textbook publishers, which form a subindustry of their own) constitute a very small minority of AAP members and have little chance to exert much influence over decisions made, such as the choice of what metadata to use. Although the **Book Industry Study Group (BISG)** is an independent nonprofit agency that presumes to serve all sectors of the book industry, and that was created in 1975 by a number of trade associations besides the AAP (such as the **Book Manufacturers Institute** and the **American Booksellers Association**), it is very much a

stepchild of the AAP, and those who serve on its various committees reflect that influence.

As **Wikipedia’s** entry for **BISG** notes, “Through BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications), **BISG** has been on the cutting edge of technological advances with the development of bar-code technology standards and electronic business communications formats. BISAC has been instrumental in developing many of the electronic standards that have reduced operating costs for members of the industry. BISAC Subject Codes, for example, are a mainstay in the industry and required for participation in many databases.” They work in conjunction with the ONIX system of data interchange that major vendors have increasingly come to demand that all publishers use. ONIX, which is the acronym for ONline Information eXchange, is described by the organization that created and oversees it, EDItEUR (established in 1991), as “an XML-based family of international standards intended to support computer-to-computer communication between parties involved in creating, distributing, licensing, or otherwise making available intellectual property in published form, whether physical or digital.” ONIX for Books, the most widely-adopted of EDItEUR’s standards that was initially released in 2000, “is now firmly established around the world as the book-trade standard for the communication of ‘rich product metadata’ — the type of metadata that are needed to support the sale of books in the supply chain, not least for online retailing” (<http://www.editeur.org/74/FAQs/#q2>). Even from this brief description one can get a sense of how crucial BISAC codes are for the smooth functioning of commerce in the book-trade today.

So, how well do the BISAC codes work for academic books? Not well at all, in my opinion, based on my more than forty years’ experience as an editor in university press publishing. The examples I will provide of their dysfunctionality

come from the fields of scholarship I know best: Latin American Studies, Philosophy, Political Science, and Sociology. Of these four fields, it should be noted at the outset, the BISAC coding system recognizes only Philosophy and Political Science as major categories. Perhaps it is understandable that no regional field of study is given this pride of place in the BISAC system, even though area studies have long been prominent in higher education, but it is surprising that not even Anthropology and Sociology are accorded a primary category. Instead, these two are lumped together under a generic Social Science heading. Is one to infer that neither Economics (which exists separately only as Business and Economics) nor Political Science nor Psychology (which gets its own separate heading) are social sciences?

How does one identify books in Latin American Studies, then? The BISAC system requires one to scurry around looking for appropriate codes under a number of other categories, including Art, Business and Economics, History, Law, Literary Criticism, Religion, and Social Science. For a title about economic development in Latin America, for instance, one can find a subcategory called Business and Economics/Development/Business Development, which seems presumptuous in pigeonholing all of economic development as business development, but no regional identifiers under Business and Economics. Looking under Social Science, one finds a subcategory for only Third World Development in general, not for any specific region. The best one can do to add a regionally delimiting identifier is to resort to History, where there are plenty of regional subcategories. Interestingly, among the subcategories specific to Latin America there are four: Central America, General, Mexico, and South America. (In an earlier version of the codes, South America was absent.) Why separate out just Mexico? In terms of salience in U.S. history, if that is the criterion, Cuba has been equally prominent. But a book on economic development may be an econometric analysis, highly mathematical,

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drawing on data from Latin America but hardly engaging in anything that we would recognize as traditional history.

At Penn State we publish many books on comparative politics and on social movements in Latin America. How do we identify these with BISAC codes? Political Science contains no regional subcategories, either, so the best one can do under that rubric is to choose Political Science/Government/Comparative. Third World Development under Social Science is generally not helpful here because comparative politics only sometimes focuses on development issues. Once again, History has to come to the rescue, but if it is a comparative study of Argentina and Mexico, say, the only possible choice is Latin America/General. (Asia and Africa each has seven subcategories, while Europe has fifteen.) But not every book in comparative politics is fairly described as History, either. Social movements, though a major topic of study by political scientists, receives no identifier specific to it under Political Science, nor is there any under Social Science, either, though anthropologists and especially sociologists produce many studies of social movements also. Nowhere in the entire BISAC system is there any way of identifying a book about social movements despite its prominence as a topic of research in academe. Even History can only partially come to the rescue here, with its subcategories of Revolutionary and Social History.

The American Political Science Association has long structured the discipline according to four main categories: American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Political Theory. The BISAC committee that invented the codes for Political Science is evidently unaware of this fact. Only International Relations gets recognized as a subcategory at the secondary level. American Politics gets no recognition at all. Comparative appears as a tertiary subcategory, as noted above. For Political Theory one is forced to choose between History and Theory as a subcategory or one of the seven subcategories of Political Ideologies: Anarchism, Communism & Socialism, Conservatism & Liberalism, Democracy, Fascism & Totalitarianism, General, and Nationalism. These are hardly very adequate signifiers for books in this field. A better choice exists under Philosophy, which has a subcategory of Political.

Sociology fares no better. The American Sociological Association has 48 official sections, which range from Aging & the Life Course to Theory. The BISAC system accords only four subcategories to Sociology, with the tertiary subcategories being General, Marriage & Family, Rural, and Urban. It is true that as secondary categories BISAC also recognizes such subfields as Criminology, Demography, Gerontology, and Sociology of Religion. Comparing BISAC's codes for Social Science with the ASA's sections reveals that 33 of the latter are completely ignored by the BISAC system, including such significant ones as Collective Behavior & Social Movements, Comparative & Historical Sociology, Economic Sociology, History of Sociology, Mathematical Sociology, Medical Sociology, Organizations, Occupations & Work, Political Sociology, and Theory. Some are only partially covered by BISAC, such as ASA's section on Sociology of Culture, which BISAC recognizes

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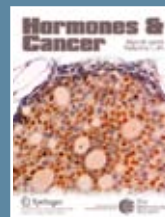


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only with the secondary subcategory of Popular Culture. Why wouldn't the BISAC committee think to look at how sociologists themselves divide up their intellectual terrain before deciding what categories to include under Social Science? This is a sin of omission, to say the very least.

Philosophy gets its own main category, but there must not have been any philosophy majors represented on the BISAC committee, because its topical identifiers don't correspond well with how philosophers think about their discipline. Yes, there are some subcategories that do reflect standard subfields, like Aesthetics, Epistemology, Ethics & Moral Philosophy (what's the difference between the two?), Logic, Metaphysics, Political Philosophy, and Philosophy of Religion

(though BISAC calls this "Religious" Philosophy instead, which is a misnomer). But where is Feminist Philosophy, Legal Philosophy, Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of History (as opposed to History of Philosophy), Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Mathematics, and Philosophy of Science — all standard subfields in the discipline? All the BISAC committee had to do to see how incomplete its subcategories are was to consult the **Wikipedia** entry for "Philosophy," for heaven's sake, let alone the authoritative *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available free to anyone online. There is simply no easy way to identify a title as feminist philosophy in the BISAC system, for instance.

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One has to resort to adding the subcategory of Feminism & Feminist Theory or perhaps Gender Studies from the Social Science codes along with some more generic codes from Philosophy, perhaps Political if that fits the subject of the particular book. One guesses that the BISAC committee members were used to browsing in the sections of retail bookstores that use “New Age” instead of “Philosophy” as designators, given the number of codes dedicated to various types of Eastern religions. While the BISAC committee ignored “Movements” as a subcategory in either Political Science or Sociology, curiously 9 of the 34 subcategories in Philosophy are devoted to them, though it is difficult to understand in what way Rationalism and Utilitarianism, to name two of the tertiary subcategories, constitute “movements” in any ordinary sense. It seems peculiar, to say the least, to carve out a special subcategory for Good & Evil and for Body & Mind, when these are merely subjects taken up in Ethics or Philosophy of Religion and Epistemology, respectively. So, too, for Free Will & Determinism. Have you ever seen a shelf in a bookstore with those designations? And then there is a subcategory of Criticism. What on earth does that mean to philosophy? What were the BISAC folks thinking?

It seems clear that the BISAC committee was much more interested in books that actually get onto the shelves of many bricks-and-mortar bookstores than in scholarly books. Juvenile Fiction and Nonfiction both get literally hundreds of secondary and tertiary subcategories devoted to them, well in excess of all the “academic” categories combined. Under both main categories, for instance, there are 27 tertiary subcategories listed under the secondary subcategory Social Issues (earlier called “Situations”). Reflecting the New Age bent of the BISAC committee, there are 44 subcategories under the main heading of Body, Mind & Spirit, almost 30% more than the entire Philosophy category contains. The evidence for the relative importance accorded by the BISAC committee to trade over academic titles is spread throughout the BISAC coding list.

Why is this a problem? It is because, as **Geoffrey Nunberg** and others have pointed out, the BISAC codes are now becoming so standard that they are being adopted even when applying them is not appropriate and positively harmful, as with **Google’s** decision to use the codes for its proposed bookselling programs under the Settlement agreement despite the acknowledged fact that the largest number of titles included in its mass digitization project are academic, not trade, books. Is there anything we can do to improve the codes and make them more useful for scholarly books? A couple of years ago I approached BISAC’s executive director, **Michael Healey** (now head of the **Book Rights Registry** under the **Google Settlement**), and volunteered to work with the BISAC committee on choosing codes better suited for the academic marketplace and more in keeping with the way scholars themselves think about their fields. The response was “Fine, but you first have to become a member of **BISG**.” The fee at that time for a university press of **Penn State’s** size was around \$1,250. I did not feel it an expenditure I could justify asking the **Press** to pay for the sake of offering advice to **BISG**. I hope that the folks on the BISAC committee will at least find their way to this article and absorb the lessons I want it to convey. 🐼

## At the only Edge that Means Anything / How We Understand What We Do

by **Dennis Brunning** (E Humanities Development Librarian, Arizona State University) <dennis.brunning@gmail.com>

### Where the Wild Things Are: eBooks Again and Again

*She said to keep our eye on the ball, but it’s hard. What game are we playing?*

It’s been a long haul, although this year’s progress has made it seem new. Who can remember the early players — **Amazon** with its **Adobe Digital Editions** and the **Microsoft E-Reader**? **Sony** made a small splash with its **E-Reader** sold mostly through **Borders**. **Amazon** scored first and significantly with its **Kindle Reader** and bookstore. Although **Amazon** isn’t talking, industry experts figure more than two million **Kindles** were sold and the sales have nudged total sales a few percentage points.

Until now the game has clung to the ground. In a flat growth industry the growth of eBook sales, although small, looms large. Large enough, that is, to sink **R&D** and marketing money.

Rare in these times, a growth industry.

In fact, eBooks are a technology game, and the techies stand behind its growth and success. Recently **Apple’s** announcement of the **iPad**, its tablet computer based on **iPhone** design and operating system, was enough to convince a few big publishers to rethink and re-negotiate relationships with **Amazon**. **Macmillan** was the first to head out to Seattle, **Amazon** territory, to suggest to **Jeff** and company that **Macmillan** ought to set the price for e-editions — for **Amazon** or any distributor. **Amazon** refused to the point of removing **Macmillan** titles from its bookstore. Within a few hours, though, they backed off and acknowledged that this publisher could set the price. Unlike **Apple** and **iTunes**, **Amazon** blinked and now new pricing models have free range.

There are now over 23 e-readers for sale. Almost every week a new player emerges, new players to stand at the scrimmage line of **Apple**, **Amazon**, and others. Why so many reader wannabees?

Simple. The book’s defining quality, its essence, is portability. No one wants to read books on computers no matter the size of the computer. Compared to smart phones and e-readers, a computer is gargantuan and only semi-portable. You want and need something you can carry and use at will — like a book.

So the device battle is about who can imagine what the reader wants and deliver it through an electronic device, Internet-cool and enabled, and keep that (human) reader.

Keeping the reader is all about the bookstore. Whether the publishers set the price, all those **Amazon Kindle** owners have bought new titles at the \$9.99 price. Whether this will survive and thrive like **iTunes’** 99 cents — let’s let the market and not pundits decide. That **Amazon** sells eBooks to **iPhone** users who simply download an **iPhone** app to use sug-

gests that publishers and reader manufacturers will have an immense market, and customers will have many choices.

For example, **Kindle** frequent customers may want to choose another type of reader that meets their needs — as long as there is a way to read what they buy at **Amazon** on their reader. We bet **Amazon** understands this and is not in the business of selling **Kindles**. They are in the business of selling **Amazon** books, whether print or electronic. **Apple** and **Google** are aware of this aspect of competition with **Amazon** and at the moment seem to be “open.” But remember the essence of each company. Both are technology companies who leverage what they do to make the most money. **Apple** will want to sell **iPads** and  **iPhones**. They may package books with them, but the object will be to move hardware. **Google** is all about adwords and adsense. Whether by the Web, mobile Internet, or whatever new technology comes around, they want to sell ads.

So a new caveat emptor emerges. The consumer now has a plethora of stuff to consider, choices to be made. You’ll just have to contend with constant device upgrades and a welter of ads assaulting your senses. And librarians — at the rainbow’s end, books from all places and a brimming box of devices and distribution.

It’s wild.

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The E-Book Publishing Space:

<http://www.ebookcrossroads.com/epublishers.html>

### Annals of Search: Google Uber Alles?

It doesn’t take much for **Google’s** competitors to cry monopoly. **Microsoft**, no stranger to this state of being, would dearly love to keep **Google’s** legal staff — numbering some say in the thousands — busy for a decade or two to level the playing field in search advertising.

**Googlers** who do not see monopoly boast vision with the following optics:

- At best, **Google** has only 60% share of search engine users.
- **Google’s** “math” neutralizes bias — guaranteeing, without human intervention, the best results.
- **Google** is free to consumers — where’s the harm?

As with **Microsoft**, the European Union has led criticism of **Google’s** behavior. The EU was slow to approve **Google’s** acquisition

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