Emily Paul
Info 202
Case Study
December 16, 2014

Overview

The New Press, a nonprofit book publisher with approximately 1,000 published titles, roughly 800 of which are actively in print and featured on the website, updated its book categories for use on thenewpress.com as part of a website redesign. Rather than fully adhering to an established book classification system, such as BISAC[1], which is commonly used in book retail, The New Press developed its own classification system. In addition to the standard goal of allowing readers to browse categories, this classification system is designed to represent the press's focus and mission. The New Press classification system employs a mix of principles and levels of granularity while incorporating some elements of the institutional categories from BISAC.

In order to gain some insight into how these dual goals affect usability I ran user tests on a mock-up of the website with the proposed categories. I conducted a think aloud exercise in which the users verbalized their thoughts as they browsed through the categories and subcategories. I then asked the users to walk through where they would go for a particular book in response to a prompt from me that included the book's title, subtitle, and a brief description. Lastly, I asked the users about what their impressions were of The New Press after looking at the categories, whether they were confused by the categories, and which categories they would be interested in looking at if they visited the site. The findings and recommendations from the user testing are summarized at the end of this case study and detailed in the user testing report.

Tags: Identifying Properties (4.3); Cultural and Institutional Categories (6.2); Principles for Creating Categories (6.3); Understanding Classification (7.2); Bibliographic Classification (7.3); Faceted Classification (7.4)

What is being organized?

The resource being organized is the digital presence of the books on thenewpress.com. The classification system is only used on The New Press website and is stored in a FileMaker database that pushes data to the website. There is already a dedicated website classification system that this new system builds on. It is worth noting that the book records in the database also contain BISAC categories. These are entered so that they can be sent out to distribution and bookseller feeds that require the industry standard categories. The BISAC categories are institutional categories created by the Book Industry Standards Group. The BISAC system is designed to reflect the interests and

[1] BISAC refers to the The Book Industry Standards and Communications Subject Heading list, an industry-approved list of subject descriptors maintained by the Book Industry Study Group. The BISAC categories are widely used by companies across the book industry from publishers and distributors to individual bookstores and in some cases libraries. (http://www.bisg.org)

understanding of general readers. As such the BISAC categories are informed by cultural categories and also influence cultural categories because of their broad adoption in the book industry. In addition to using some institutional categories from BISAC and mainstream cultural categories, The New Press is using cultural categories from specific groups, namely academics and progressives, to connect with specific readers.

Why is it being organized?
The books are being categorized to facilitate browsing by readers and supporters on The New Press website. In addition to the primary browsing interaction the categories are also being used as an opportunity to position The New Press and to convey a sense of its mission.

How much is it being organized?
For the purposes of The New Press website, books can be placed in multiple categories and subcategories but all books will have at least one category designation. Because The New Press is not concerned with the physical presentation of the resources the books can be placed in as many categories as are relevant. In contrast, library and bookstore classifications need to satisfy the uniqueness principle, because the book can only be located in one physical location.

Most of the categories are based on the subject matter of the books. A book's subject matter is an intrinsic static property because it does not change once it is published. However, the categories used to describe this subject matter may change over time as new categories are added to the classification system and retroactively assigned to previously published books. The book subject categories can generally be thought of as extrinsic static because the threshold for changing them is higher than it is for more dynamic properties such as Current Season, Next Season, and Bestsellers. These categories are also included on the site in a separate section and are all extrinsic dynamic properties because they are based either on time or sales, rather than intrinsic properties of the books.

The New Press classification system includes hierarchical categories, though only the subjects in which the press publishes more extensively have subcategories. In areas for which there are more books the organization can be more granular without creating a subcategory that contains only one or a few books. Additionally, the greater institutional knowledge of the subject area enables the staff to make more specific distinctions within the broader subject category. One of the questions I explore in my user testing is whether these differentiations are necessary to support users' interactions with the books. If the users do not share the same level of knowledge in the subject it may not be useful, and may even diminish usability, to differentiate at the level of granularity provided by the subcategories.

Even at the top category level there is a range of granularity and also a range of principles embodied in the categories. For example, *History* and *Immigration* are both top-level categories, but *Immigration* covers a more specific group of topics than *History* does. Most categories are based on the subject of the books but there are several top-level

categories based on other principles. These include *Graphic Nonfiction*, which refers to format, *Primary Source Documents*, which refers to the source material, and *Biography*, which refers to the genre of the book but does not express anything about its subject matter beyond the fact that it is about someone's life. Mixing category principles can be useful, particularly in a faceted system, which allows users to combine different categories to increase precision. In a faceted version of this system a user could select *Biography* and *Law* in order to find biographies written about a judge or lawyer. Because books are assigned to all relevant categories in this system this interaction is feasible at the logic level even though the current presentation does not allow it. If The New Press wanted to switch to a faceted presentation it would likely visually separate the categories into blocks based on the principles so that users know which facets they can pivot their search on. This could include creating a genre section with *Biography*, *Oral History*, and *Primary Source Documents* as well as a geography section with the subcategories from *World*.

When is it being organized?
Once the updated categories are finalized all previously published books will be reviewed and assigned to new categories as necessary. Going forward, new books will be categorized on a seasonal basis and new categories may occasionally be assigned to previously published books on an ad hoc basis (this could be due to previous oversight in not assigning the category or to the creation of a new category or subcategory). This system is flexible because books can be assigned to all relevant categories, so the introduction of a new category does not mean that all previous assignments will need to be changed. The subcategories also allow for flexibility because over time if one of these categories becomes more important, it can be changed at the presentation level to a top-level category with minimal effort.

How or by whom is it being organized?
The sales, marketing, and inventory manager assigns the categories, with input from the editorial and marketing teams. From time to time other departments, such as fundraising or publicity, may suggest a new category or category assignment for consideration. The categories are assigned in a FileMaker database in which the categories can be selected from a list of existing categories and subcategories. The category assignments in the FileMaker database are pushed to the website along with other book data.

Other Considerations
Creating a classification system that can be widely understood is difficult to do. In this case simplifying the system would support The New Press's goal of reaching a broad audience of readers. User testing revealed that the current category system may be hindering this because of issues with semantics, granularity, and structure. The structural issues are the most important to address because the inconsistent use of subcategories generated significant confusion during the user testing. By removing the subcategories and instead allowing expert users or those who know exactly what they are looking for to use search, the press could maximize the categories' relevance for general readers. This could be strengthened by an emphasis on using relevant keywords in the book descriptions that support searching. Despite some initial surprise from the test users about

certain unusual top-level categories I would argue that after simplifying other aspects of the system the press could successfully keep some of these in order to represent its publishing areas and connect with like-minded readers. For example, *Immigration* and *Criminal Justice* are not top-level BISAC categories, but are easily understood by general readers, and serve to highlight these important areas for The New Press.

Biases in classification systems are unavoidable. While this can be negative, particularly when the organizers are not aware of the biases, it can also be harnessed positively and used to communicate a sense of the organization and its values. This needs to be approached thoughtfully and carefully and needs to be tested on users to understand how people outside the organization will interact with the system.

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Case Study Supporting Material
December 16, 2014

Report on The New Press Website Categories User Testing

Summary:
I ran user tests on a mock-up of the books section of The New Press website (see attached screenshots of mock-up and current site) to assess the categories' usability for browsing as well as their ability to connect visitors to The New Press's mission.

Methodology:
The test consisted of three parts: a think aloud in which the users were encouraged to look at the categories and subcategories and share their thoughts; four scenarios in which I read the title, subtitle, and a brief description of a book and asked them which categories they would look for it under; and questions on what their impressions were of The New Press after looking at the categories, whether they were confused by the categories, and which categories they would be interested in looking at if they visited the site. I used the think aloud to gain insight into what people thought about the categories, what surprised or confused them, and what they would change. The book searching scenarios were not naturalistic in that if a user looking for a particular book would most likely use the search function. The scenarios did, however, provide information about how well the set of categories reflected the user's mental model. The question about what the user thought of The New Press after the test gave a sense of how well the categories communicate The New Press mission. This is important to test because this was a major motivation for selecting this set of categories. I also asked which categories the user thought she would be likely to look at to assess whether her interest was piqued by the categories and see which categories resonated the most.

Results:
Users made some specific recommendations for category changes (including making *Food Politics* a subcategory under *Environment*, putting *Criminal Justice* under *Law* or *Human Rights*, and putting *Inequality* and *Labor* under *Economics*). *Graphic Nonfiction* was an unfamiliar phrase to all of the users though they correctly guessed that it referred to nonfiction in graphic form. The users did not have a clear sense of what the *World* category would contain. One user asked if it contained books by authors from the different regions listed as subcategories. Another asked "what about the world?", wondering how the subject matter of the *World* category would interact with the *History* and *Politics* categories. Users were similarly confused by the *Race and Ethnicity* category, which they saw as being relevant across other categories. *Oral History* confused users because it appears as both a subcategory and a top-level category.

In general, the users expected subcategories to be exhaustive; that is, they thought that if a category has subcategories all the books in that category would fit into one or more subcategory. For example, one user asked why *Biography* only has *Autobiography* and

Memoir as subcategories, thinking that other biographical forms would need to be included somewhere. Another user asked why *History* has only *Oral History* and *American History* as subcategories. The users were further confused because some top-level categories do not have any subcategories. One user commented that this gave the impression that the organizers were not able to come up with subcategories for those categories.

In the scenarios involving finding specific books using the categories the users were able to identify which categories they would look at fairly quickly and the categories selected were similar across users. However, in the case of the book *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America* users were unsure where they would look and selected a range of categories including *Arts and Culture*, *Human Rights*, *Economics*, and *U.S. Politics*.

The users did get an impression of The New Press's identity from the classification system. They commented that the press seems to have a political slant, that it seems focused on activism and social justice, and that it seems academic. The users expressed some confusion with the categories overall, with one saying that they seemed redundant. The users were able to identify several categories that they would be interested in exploring when visiting the site, in some cases expressing interest in a category because they were unsure of exactly what that category would contain.

Findings and Recommendations:

The issues raised by the user testing can be placed into three broad groups: semantic, granular, and structural. The semantic issues arose from the use of nonstandard categories; in most cases the user noticed the unusual categories but was still able to guess what they contained, though in a few cases the categories seemed odd enough that the user suggested changes or seemed confused by them. There is semantic imbalance across the categories that is driven by The New Press's specializations and a desire to make sure that interested readers see that books are available to them. Depending on the test user's interest areas these more granular categories stood out. One user understandably suggested several ways to move some of the top-level categories to subcategories. Two types of structural issues came out in the testing. The first arose from the fact that there are multiple principles informing the categories so some of the categories logically cut across others. The second structural issue emerges from the hierarchy in which not all top-level categories have subcategories and in those that do the subcategories are not comprehensive. Some of these were issues I was expecting to see, particularly the semantic issues and the granularity issues, but I had not anticipated that users would expect that all books in a category would be classified in at least one subcategory.

Users commented on certain categories seeming academic (*Gender and Sexuality*, *Media Studies*) and also shared an overall impression that the books published by The New Press would be academic. Reaching a broad audience of readers is core to The New Press mission. Categories that seem academic and that have the potential to alienate some readers is a problem that should be considered. This is an issue of using institutional

categories from academia rather than cultural categories that would by their nature be familiar to a broader range of readers, for example *Media Studies* could be changed to *Media* or *Media and Journalism*.

Because there is a range of principles informing the categories, a faceted system, or at least a segmented presentation of the categories, could be helpful. The majority of the categories are based on the books' subject but there are also categories based on geographic location or format/genre that intersect with the subject-based categories. The New Press could consider switching to a faceted system that would allow selection across these three facets. A less complex solution would be for The New Press to display the categories in different sections to acknowledge their inconsistencies while still only allowing users to select one category at a time.

Overall, I would recommend simplifying the categories as much as possible by removing the hierarchy and allowing users who are looking for books on more specific topics to use the search function. The semantic issues that arise from the categories that seem to cut across the subject-based categories could be addressed by segmenting the listing of the categories to acknowledge their differing underlying principles. In some cases, as with *Inequality*, I would recommend removing the category because it is represented across most of the books published by The New Press. Despite some initial surprise from the test users about certain unusual top-level categories I would argue that after simplifying other aspects of the system the press could successfully keep some of these in order to represent its publishing areas and connect with like-minded readers. For example, *Immigration* and *Criminal Justice*, while not top-level BISAC categories, are easily understood by general readers, and serve to highlight important areas for The New Press.

THE NEW PRESS

Mock-up of Book section of The New Press website using proposed categories available at: http://aor52s.axshare.com/#c=2

- Current Season
- New Releases
- Bestsellers
- All

- Arts & Culture ▶
- Biography ▶
- Criminal Justice ▶
- Economics ▶
- Education ▶
- Environment & Food Politics
- Fiction and Literature ▶
- Gender and Sexuality
- Graphic Nonfiction
- History ▶
- Human Rights
- Immigration
- Inequality
- Labor
- Law
- Media Studies
- National Security
- Oral History
- Philosophy
- Politics ▶
- Primary Source Documents
- World ▶
- Race and Ethnicity ▶

Current Season

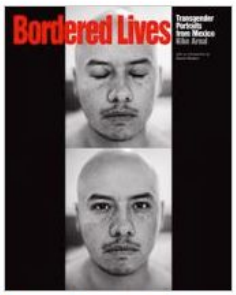
Search books:

Sort by: Publication date

Lyudmila and Natasha

Russian Lives

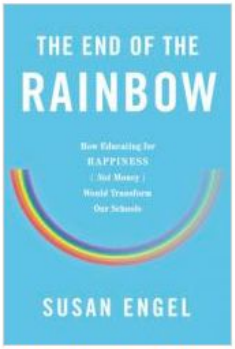
Misha Friedman



Bordered Lives

Transgender Portraits from Mexico

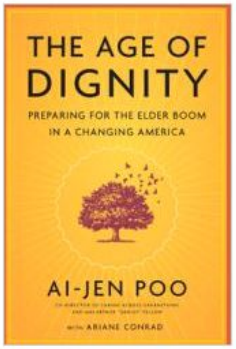
Kike Arnal



The End of the Rainbow

How Educating for Happiness (Not Money) Would Transform Our Schools

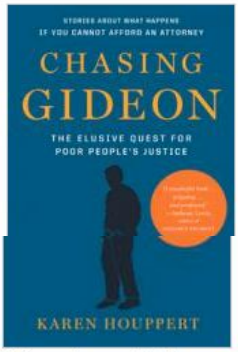
Susan Engel



The Age of Dignity

Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America

Ai-jen Poo



Chasing Gideon

The Elusive Quest for Poor People's Justice

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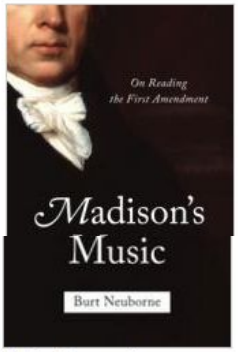
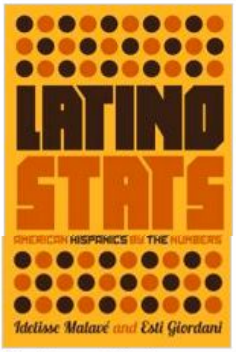


Madison's Music

On Reading the First Amendment

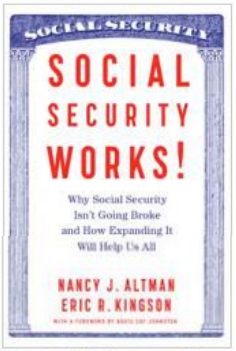
Burt Neuborne



Latino Stats

American Hispanics by the Numbers

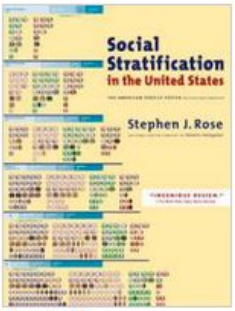
Idelisse Malavé, Esti Giordani



Social Security Works!

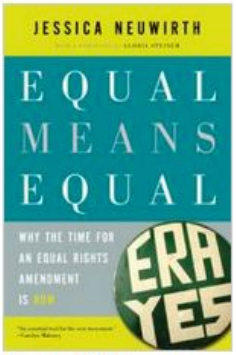
Why Social Security Isn't Going Broke and How Expanding It Will Help Us All

Nancy J. Altman, Eric R. Kingson

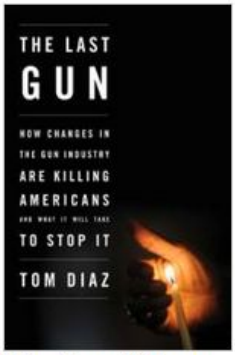


Social

A Theory of the



Equal Means



The Last Gun

THE NEW PRESS

Current categories in Book section of The New Press website www.thenewpress.com/books

Current Season
Next Season
New Releases
Bestsellers
All

By topic:
African American
Arts/Culture/Film
Asian American
Criminal Justice/Law
Current Affairs
Ecology/Health
Economics/Globalization
Education
Fiction/Literature
Gender Studies
Human Rights
Labor Studies
Latin America
Media/Journalism
Middle East
Philosophy
Political Science
Religion
Sociology
U.S. History
World History/WWII

Current Season

Search books:

Sort by: Publication date

Lyudmila and Natasha

Russian Lives

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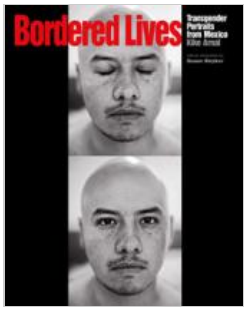

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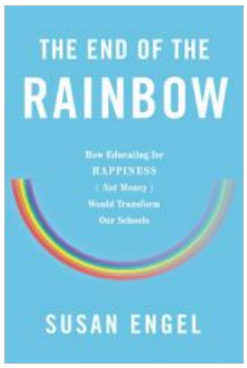

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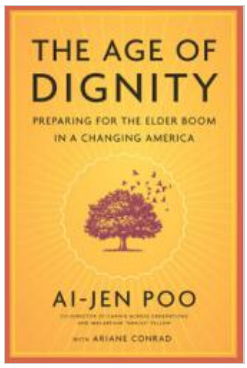

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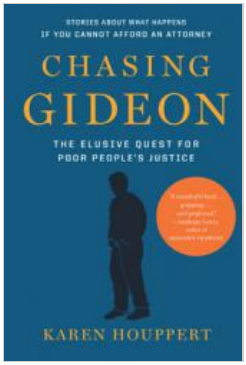

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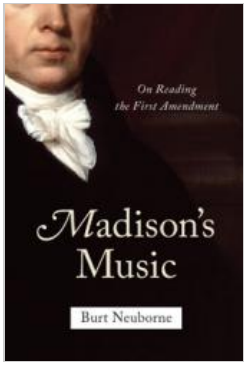

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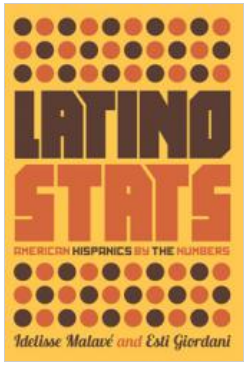

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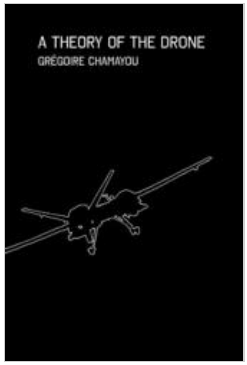

A Theory of the Drone

Grégoire Chamayou