A New Order for an Old List:

Minnie Earl Sears and the *Sears List*

Halsted M. Bernard

Wayne State University

Abstract

Minnie Earl Sears developed the *Sears List* to assist catalogers of small libraries by providing subject headings that were more usable than the ALA and Library of Congress lists. Does the *Sears List* hold the key to bridging the divide between user-generated taxonomies and purely controlled vocabularies?

*Keywords:* Minnie Earl Sears, cataloging, classification, Sears List, taxonomies, controlled vocabularies, folksonomies.

Minnie Earl Sears was born on November 17th, 1873 in Lafayette, Indiana. At eighteen, she was the youngest in her class at Purdue University to earn a B.S. Two years later, Sears earned an M.S. and went on to the University of Illinois to receive a B.L.S. before working at Bryn Mawr College, the University of Minnesota, and the New York Public Library as a cataloger. With this formidable combination of education, vocational experience, and passion for subject cataloging, Sears joined the staff of H.W. Wilson, where she created the *Sears List of Subject Headings*, originally titled *List of Subject Headings for Small Libraries*, now in its 20th printing.

Described by her friend and co-editor Isadore Mudge, Sears would have been an excellent reference librarian, had she not been fascinated by subject cataloging. Though she was best known for the *Sears List*, Sears also created the first master’s degree cataloging course at Columbia University.

The *Sears List* is a subject-heading system that uses a controlled vocabulary – specially chosen words and phrases that tag units of information – in order to reduce ambiguity and increase consistency in cataloging library materials. The purpose of subject cataloging as stated by Martha T. Mooney in the 14th edition of the *Sears List* is “to list under one uniform word or phrase all of the materials on a given subject that a library has in its collection” . Instead of navigating the complexities of the Library of Congress Subject Headings, catalogers in small- to medium-sized libraries have relied upon the simplicity and efficacy of the *Sears List*.

Today, Sears’ contribution may not seem as exciting or as relevant for the average library user, particularly a Web-savvy one. With the widespread adoption of the Web, the user-generated taxonomy – or folksonomy, as it has been coined by Thomas Vander Wal – has risen in popularity. Photo-sharing websites like Flickr[[1]](#footnote-1) and bookmarking websites like Delicious[[2]](#footnote-2) are constructed around folksonomies; users tag their information with keywords of their choosing for easy storage and retrieval. However, folksonomies have a significant drawback: without a method of control, organization on any scale larger than the individual is illusory. One person may tag a photo “America” and another “United States” and still another “the United States of America”. All three refer to the same concept, but without a controlled-vocabulary system, there is no definitive way to link them as yet. However, as libraries attempt to market their services via the Web, the *Sears List* may prove a user-friendly middle ground between the folksonomy and the controlled vocabulary.

One of my professional interests is in how to adequately bridge this middle ground, merging the usefulness of a controlled vocabulary with the flexibility of a folksonomy. Were I to create the Bernard List, it would collect user-suggested keywords and map them onto *Sears List* subject headings. With this scheme, library users would be able to use familiar tags to find materials in the catalog. The Bernard List would be automated with some degree of artificial intelligence in order to learn pathways and eventually predict user input based on constellations of previously-searched keywords, similar to Google Instant[[3]](#footnote-3). In Minnie Earl Sears’ memory, we can think of the Web as the small library, and apply the same principles of the *Sears List* in order to innovate and improve its indexing and retrieval.

# References

Kniffel, L., Sullivan, P., & McCormick, E. (1999). 100 of the most important leaders we had in the 20th century. *American Libraries* *, 30* (11), 46.

Mooney, M. T. (Ed.). (1991). *Sears List of Subject Headings* (14th ed.). New York: The H.W. Wilson Company.

The H.W. Wilson Company. (2004, February 6). *Minnie Earl Sears: The Woman Behind Sears List.* Retrieved September 29, 2010, from H.W. Wilson Press Room: http://www.hwwilson.com/news/news\_2\_6\_04.cfm#story

Vander Wal, T. (2007, February 2). *Folksonomy Coinage and Definition.* Retrieved October 1, 2010, from vanderwal.net: http://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html

1. <http://www.flickr.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://delicious.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.google.com/instant/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)