NMA0303/STA0303

To: Metadata Working Party
    Standards Working Party

Re: IPTC SRS- The Future

From: John Minting UPI.

It is apparent that IPTC is approaching a critical juncture as far as the Subject Reference System (SRS) is concerned, and will need to make a decision on its future direction.

There are some members who believe that the SRS should be fixed at the current level for IPTC, with any expansion on a member by member basis, and with the use of keywords (without numerical identifiers?) where more granularity is required.

Other members believe we should allow the SRS to expand as much as needed to adapt to new uses, new words and concepts and new technologies. They believe that by doing so, IPTC can remain the leader in creating an international taxonomy.

There is a strong argument for adopting the latter position, although it will require some changes in our basic operating procedures as laid down in the IPTC Subject Reference Guidelines.

IPTC, in its wisdom, based upon the technology of the day, expanded the original ANPA 1312 & IPTC 7901's terse and inflexible category list into a greatly expanded hierarchy of terms relating to the general news industry. It was, in retrospect, an extremely comprehensive list of terms when one considers that this was done manually. Unfortunately, I believe that much of the inflexibility of ANPA 1312/IPTC 7901 was also built into the guidelines and into some thinking as to how this expanded categorization would evolve.

In recent years we have seen the development of machine aided indexing (MAI) which has changed the original concept of an editor choosing a category or categories for a news object. Now an intelligent processor can mine depths of indexing that our overworked editors cannot. But to achieve this the MAI engine has to have had its intelligence supported with an ever-expanding taxonomy – a list of terms, sub-terms, and sub-sub-terms and more, that index the news object to such a degree that it adds intrinsic value both in real time and for future database search retrieval.

The IPTC SRS can be such a taxonomy -- the definitive list of defined terms, in many languages but with a common numeric entity, that needs to be continually updated to reflect a changing world and to reflect the needs of users.

We have seen a number of presentations during our meetings from companies that provide MAI. A number of these companies have and are using the IPTC SRS as the taxonomy to support their MAI. It is in the IPTC's interest that this continue. If the SRS is allowed to become fixed, to become stagnant, and to become inflexible, the need for a taxonomy that continues to evolve and expand and update itself will be taken over by individual users. If that happens the SRS could become irrelevant, and users, our members, would be forced to go to individual developers and bargain for their services.

For those of us who are using the IPTC SRS and believe it should continue to grow, and remain the standard which other Members, and others will use, it is obvious that we must modify some of the guidelines, and some of the thinking about how the SRS will be handled in the future.

First, I feel the ritual of debating new terms to the nth degree takes up too much of the delegates' time and should be relegated to an off-line committee, whose sole job would be to make sure that a term is not duplicated in meaning within the same Subject category.

Second, it is very obvious that the guidelines under "Criteria for Inclusion" need to be removed because they limit the extensibility for such an international standard. The points made are totally subjective and do not reflect reality.

Third: Under " Duplication and Inheritance" the idea that a term under one Subject can be used to describe the same term under another Subject goes totally against logic.

For example: Under Arts, Culture and Entertainment we have television, and we have the term again under Business and Economics. Both are perfectly logical and it is clear that television as a business (04010010) would not fit for television (01016000) programming of the dramas and sitcoms which are clearly entertainment. But neither logically serves if the news object concerns television news coverage or the thousands of people engaged in it. Yet there is no code for that, nor is there a clear Subject category under which it can fall.

No search engine can guess. It has to have a full list of terms following a hierarchy to do its job of finding the objects being requested. There may be some that feel it is an impossible task to take on, that it will be a never ending task. It is likely a task that will never end, but it is not an impossible task. We have created a credible taxonomy, we just need to build on it, and quickly, and we must make it more flexible, even to considering the creation of other Subject categories,

before we are overtaken and someone else gets the benefits and the credits for what we have done.

 So that is where we are -- will the SRS live and remain the international standard with the IPTC name behind it, or will it be encapsulated and relegated to the "museum of good ideas that didn't take off"

JEM 1/18/03