

Surveying Interdisciplinary Scholarship on Democracy

Challenge:

ICDD began as a group of interdisciplinary faculty who were interested in democracy and its relationship to civic discourse. No existing databases of scholarly literature existed on democracy at that time, let alone democracy in relationship to civic discourse. This lack of a well-defined knowledge base not only handicaps research, but also challenges those wishing to develop curricula related to democracy in various disciplines. Even those from disciplines such as history or political science, whom we expected to have already identified a body of literature about democracy, had not done so. In some respects, this was no surprise, acknowledging what diverse perspectives or objectives our own faculty brought to the study of democracy. Using this as an opportunity to service the wider community of democracy scholars, we outlined the topics that our faculty expected to use in a working database. Then ICDD's Library Associate, [Donna Schenck-Hamlin](#), began compiling references from a wide range of scholarly and organizational resources to fit those topics. The initial topics of interest to ICDD faculty were:

1. Deliberation and facilitation methods and models
2. Politics and government
3. Online/Internet communication and e-democracy
4. Citizen participation, civic engagement, citizenship, and enfranchisement
5. Democracy and education
6. Evaluation
7. Media and democracy
8. Political/philosophical theory

As a librarian, Schenck-Hamlin wanted to know the utility of a classification schema to users of a democracy scholarship database, but before testing it on the wider community, ICDD needed to determine how consistently a group of coders using the schema would be in applying those eight subjects to a set of documents. Then, ICDD wanted to examine the distribution of published literature across the classification schema.

Solution:

With the aid of a reference management utility known as *Refworks*, we were able to import and organize references to democracy literature from keyword searches of databases in the social sciences, sciences, and humanities. *Refworks* offers scholars the ability to self-classify records in multiple ways and to share the database online with others via "Refshare." [The database is linked on ICDD's website.](#)

To test whether individual coders would be consistent in their application of the categories to the database, Schenck-Hamlin asked two student assistants and one faculty researcher to help with an experiment classifying a sample of the literature from 1980 to 2005 with "democracy" in the title. From the beginning, ICDD researchers observed important additional themes in democracy literature that the original eight did not cover, and these categories were named as:

9. Public Opinion
10. Social Influences
11. Economic Influences
12. Organizational Democracy
13. History
14. Arts and Letters

A random sample of 30% of the “democracy” titled documents downloaded from *Web of Science*, a major international scholarly database indexing published journals in the sciences, humanities and social sciences, provided 2,170 titles to examine. Donna Schenck-Hamlin, Elizabeth Westmoreland, Kevin Keatley, and Bill Schenck-Hamlin independently coded these documents, and achieved statistically significant inter-coder reliability scores (based on the *kappa* measurement) in all categories except 4 (citizen participation, civic engagement, citizenship, and enfranchisement) and 10 (Social Influences). Poor inter-coder reliability suggests that the coders do not share a common understanding of the named category or would disagree on its application to given documents. In either case, end-users of the database might not find the information they anticipate under that category, if coders cannot agree.

Results:

With 12 out of 14 categories showing adequate (*kappa* = .46) to excellent (*kappa* = .81) inter-coder reliability, the sample showed the following distribution of coded subject categories for the published scholarship between 1980 and 2005:

Politics and Government	39%
Political/Philosophical Theory	24%
History	14%
Social Influences	12%
Economic Influences	11%
Citizen Participation, Civic Engagement, Citizenship, Enfranchisement	10%
Organizational Democracy	7%
Democracy and Education	5%
Arts and Letters	3%
Deliberation, Facilitation, Methods, Models	3%
Public Opinion	2%
Media and Democracy	2%
Online/Internet Communication, E-democracy	2%
Evaluation	0%

This classification schema helps filter results when keyword searches supply too much information for end-users, but only if the subject categories match users’ inquiries. Immediately following this research, academic colleagues outside of ICDD called for an expansion of the schema to include other subjects pertinent to democracy such as dissent, conflict, and security studies. Since a robust classification system grows to cover the range of related attributes in scholarship, it will be necessary to collaborate with other institutions and scholarly communities as the database grows. A shared research project has been proposed with other institutions studying democracy and members of the American Library Association to extend this practical research. ICDD has initiated efforts to link data across a community of scholarly (government, nonprofit and academic) interest groups with a focus on interdisciplinary democracy research. As new research is conducted, ICDD continues to update the database to provide the most effective tool possible.