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100 Years of Marginalization: Documenting Backward, Developing Forward

Abstract:

Many knowledge organization researchers and cultural heritage practitioners authors have illustrated the fallacies, inconsistencies, failures, mistakes, and incorrect information contained in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). However, LCSH and its associated apparatus continues to be the dominant knowledge organization system in academic libraries (and increasingly, archives). This panel brings together individuals involved in a pair of connected projects aimed at documenting the harm and/or inaccuracies caused by LCSH by engaging in "ethical outreach" to creators and authors; by developing alternative "radical" or "critical" practices; and by evaluating the results of those practices.

1. Introduction

In 2000, the centennial of the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) was celebrated by Library and Information Science (LIS) book publisher Haworth Information Press and the journal Cataloging and Classification Quarterly (CCQ) through the co-publication of a collection of essays (Haworth in book format, CCQ in serial) aimed at celebrating the centennial of the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Their shared title "The LCSH Century: One Hundred Years with the Library of Congress Subject Headings System" (Stone 2000) was similar in tone to—and clearly aimed to align with—a wave similarly-titled books and texts celebrating the turn of the new millennium. Largely, these essays were celebratory in nature, with the exception of Hope A. Olson's "Difference, Culture and Change: The Untapped Potential of LCSH" (Olson 2000, 53). Over the course of her chapter, Olson documented dozens of issues

with the Library of Congress' subject headings on the basis of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, ability and other factors.

Contemporaneous and subsequent work has also supported Olson's arguments, especially concerning LGTBQIA2S+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, and others; henceforth queer) and Indigenous topics, the topics related to this panel proposal. Researchers such as Melissa Adler (2009; 2015; 2016; 2017; Adler and Tennis 2013; Adler, Huber, and Nix 2017), Ellen Greenblatt (1990a; 1990b; 2011), K.R. Roberto (2008; 2011), Amber Billey and Emily Drabinski (Billey, Drabinski, and Roberto 2014; Billey 2019; Billey and Drabinski 2019) and many others have discussed queer topics, and Christine Bone (Bone et al. 2015; Bone and Lougheed 2018), Sandra Littletree, Miranda Belarde-Lewis and Marisa Duarte (Littletree and Metoyer 2015; Littletree, Belarde-Lewis, and Duarte 2020; Duarte and Belarde-Lewis 2015) and many others have discussed Indigenous topics. These authors have thoroughly illustrated the fallacies, inconsistencies, failures, mistakes, and incorrect information contained in LCSH. Some such as Rawson (2009; 2018), Nichols and Cortez (2013), and Nowak and Mitchell (2016), have suggested the creation of alternative vocabularies, ontologies, and taxonomies, respectively, to address these problems. For queer topics, the Homosaurus has developed as an alternative (van der Wel and Greenblatt 2013; Watson, Noland, and Billey 2021; Zwaaf 2020; Homosaurus et al. 2020), and a variety of proposals are developing for Indigenous ones (Nyitray and Reijerkerk 2021; Cherry and Mukunda 2015; 2015; Swanson 2015; Bosum and Dunne 2017).

However, despite the well-documented issues with the vocabulary, LCSH continues to be used because it is still 1) important for users (Gross, Taylor, and Joudrey 2015); 2) there is a sense that that there is a lack of a viable alternatives, 3) and standard practices at many institutions are based on LCSH.

2. Approaches

This panel brings together individuals involved in a pair of connected projects aimed at 1) documenting the harm and/or inaccuracies caused by Library of Congress Subject Headings; 2) engaging in "ethical outreach" (Fox and Gross 2019) to creators and authors; 3) developing alternative "radical" (Roberto 2008) or "critical" (Watson 2020) cataloging practices; and 4) undertaking and evaluating the results of those practices. The two projects are named Subjects from the Margins (SFTM), and Our Own Labels (OOL), were supported by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) through a Insight Development Grant and a Partnership Engage Grant fund respectively.

The first, SFTM, questions the accuracy of LCSH headings on or about Indigenous topics as well as the utility of preserving older terminology. It does this by interviewing authors selected for the

likelihood their work would be catalogued differently according to some contemporary, alternative cataloguing rules that address common problems with LCSH. Secondly, they are asked about the assigned headings using representative catalogue records taken from the Library of Congress, the participants' home institutions, and ones made under alternative cataloguing rules. Finally, they were asked several other questions about their familiarity with cataloging and their opinions on the accuracy of the traditional and alternative catalog records was documented.

The second, OOL, questions the accuracy of LCSH hearings on or about topics and investigates the viability of alternative cataloging approaches and vocabulary by contacting authors whose works belong to the collection of a queer community-focused library and discussing the cataloging of their book under traditional and community-based cataloging approaches. In contrast to SFTM, these interviews draw attention to issues of identity and representation, and ask authors to consider bringing their own identity into the catalogue record. It also gives them an informed choice as to how their works are represented in the library, and finally (as needed) allows for the recataloging their book in the community library. The nature of this project and the Partnership Grant means that there is an opportunity for more immediate impacts to result from the study's findings, and it also helps to ground theoretical considerations in a specific community and in the technical context of a library.

The two projects share several characteristics:
- Immediate contact with the creators of items in the library, engaging with them on subject headings representing their work. As we would expect from our familiarity with library processes and constraints, they had never been asked for their input or assessment of these representations before and few had ever even looked at the catalogue record of their own works before.
- Many opportunities for surprises for both participants and researchers—participants because they were unfamiliar with the workings of the catalogue as it affects their work and researchers for unexpected insights into aspects of the catalogue record that now seem overly familiar and natural to us from our experience navigating and creating the catalogue
- An indication that item creators are hungry for this kind of dialogue and, while they may find many flaws in how their works are reduced to a few subject terms, a deep appreciation for library work and a wish to engage more deeply in how their disciplines and identities are translated into controlled vocabularies

3. Panel Format

In order to cover the greatest possible range of experience, we propose this as a panel because each of the participants are able to discuss different aspects or perspectives about the interview process and/or their experience with catalogs. Additionally, the panel format allows for 1)

greater use and discussion of quotes from interviews with creators, 2) broader discussion of outrageous or enraging subject heading discoveries, 3) for the sharing of late-breaking and ongoing developments from the projects and finally 4) it allows for a more interactive and flexible engagement with conference participants, especially around questions of methodology for research and design implication for cultural heritage institutions. We invite participation from practitioners, academics, and researchers from throughout GLAMS (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums, and Special Collections), broadly construed.

4. Participants

Participants will include
- Dr. Julia Bullard: an assistant professor with a primary research and teaching focus in knowledge organization. She oversees the two related projects and the current and former graduate students on the project and will speak to the theoretical context for the projects, how the approaches in the projects build on and differ from prior work on controlled vocabulary research, and intentions for future work in this area.
- Tamara Lee: a graduate of UBC's an Information Science program, who has previously published an award-winning paper on the one of the projects described above. She will be able to discuss the initial work that was undertaken to prepare for it. This student belongs to the marginalized community group that the SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant funded and will be able to discuss the ways that the community partnership connects to this project.
- Rio Picollo: a Master's student in an information science program, and has been involved with both projects described above, albeit in different capacities, and will be able to offer perspectives on the ways that the two projects are similar and different. This student also belongs to the marginalized community group that the SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant funded.
- Gerry Goh: a Master's student in an information science program, and has been involved with one of the projects described above and will discuss one of the projects discussed above in depth.
- Caitlin Purdome: a Master's student in an information science program, and has been involved with one of the projects described above and will discuss one of the projects discussed above in depth.
- Brian M. Watson: a Doctoral student in an information science program, and has been involved with both projects in various ways, and will be able to discuss their perspective as a participant and as a representative from a community-developed vocabulary that serves as an alternative to LCSH. This student also belongs to the marginalized community group that the SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant funded.

In order to cover as many topics as possible, we will discuss several episodes from interviews where interviewees' experiences, impressions, or expectations of controlled vocabularies were in direct contradiction with knowledge organization systems' principals or rules. We will also discuss the investigation of subject headings that interviewees found controversial in an accessible way.

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