How Recent Changes in Subject Descriptions Improve Classification

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The evolution of subject headings peaked my interest earlier this semester after having a conversation at the academic library where I work at Johnson & Wales University in North Miami. We are predominantly a culinary campus and the library director, Nicole Covone, was explaining how, until recently, "cookery" was a subject heading in the Library of Congress. This heading changed to "cooking" in 2010 (Library of Congress, 2010). Covone explained how before 2010, students would search for cooking, cuisine, or culinary, but cookery was a term most students were not familiar with, and from this conversation I became interested in how the evolution of subject headings improves patrons' searching experience.

This semester in LIS 5020, we wrote a paper on ethics in the library. In my research for that paper, I came across the evolution of subject headings for LGBTQ materials in Library of Congress catalog system. For example, the Library of Congress changed "Sexual Perversion" to "Homosexuality" in the 1940s. It wasn't until the 1970s that the LC began to include terms such as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (Baumann, 2015).

The Library of Congress's system for subject headings may function similarly to rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court. Both systems follow precedent and allow the test of time to weigh in on terms, norms, and societal progress. They do this before making a subject heading change or taking up a case where the ruling would then be the law of the land. In *Obsolescence in Subject Description*, Buckland (2012) reiterates, "Meanings are established by usage, and so always draw on the past" (p. 156). America witnessed the principle of precedent in 2015 with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage. Building up to this ruling, many states had passed laws supporting gay marriage. LGBTQ actors, musicians, athletes, and many American citizens were out of the closet in their lives. The demand for and the foundation, precedent, and

necessity of recognizing marriage—regardless of gender—as an inherent right had been

beginning to be established for decades.

When looking at cookery or LGBTQ subject headings, there are different reasons why

the subject headings needed to be changed. Cookery has become an outdated term. It's easy to

see from the student searches at our university in 2018 that terms like cuisine, cooking, culinary,

artisan, or fusion may come to mind, and that many students have never heard of the term

cookery. LGBTQ subject headings were initially categorized in the 1920's under "Abnormal Sex

Relations" in the Library of Congress and were categorized in the 1930's in the Dewey Decimal

System under the heading "Mental Illness" (Baumann, 2015). The history of LGBTQ headings

not only reminds us how some terms and ideas have antiquated, but also represent a shift from

homophobic and transphobic categorization to the beginning of the acceptance of the LGBTQ

community in Western library catalog systems.

Subject headings related to the LGBTQ community continues to be a topic of discussion,

especially in relation to subject headings for transgender and gender variant people. The

exclusion of correct and relevant LGBTQ subject headings has hindered catalog searches and

demoralized the people erased from classification. Knowlton (2005) highlights the importance of

diversity among the editors in charge of subject headings:

> By utilizing the language and perspective of a particular group of readers, rather than
>
> seeking a more neutral set of terms, *LCSH* can make materials hard to find for other
>
> users, stigmatize certain groups of people with inaccurate or demeaning labels, and create
>
> the impression that certain points of view are normal and others unusual. (p. 125)

To say one viewpoint is normal and another unusual highlights bias in the cataloging

system. Just as the Supreme Court has evolved to legalize integrated schools, women

voting, and gay marriage, so have the library catalogs progressed to include inclusive

language, terminology determined by members of communities, and diversity in who

determines the subject headings. In both the Supreme Court and in subject headings,

progress was assisted by diversity in information studies and justices. Representation in

race, religion, gender, and many other diversities opens discussions and viewpoints, and

begins to breakdown the hegemonic hierarch in both judicial and library systems.

      Civil rights, feminism, and gender studies are examples of some additional areas in which

subject headings have undergone updates to grow inclusion and recognition in the catalog.

Activists play an intregel role in forcing scholarly journals and library catalogs to acknowledge

and categorize subject headings with transparency. Activists hold librarians accountable to focus

on the needs of the community or category they represent, and consider how that community and

the public might search for the topic. In *Queering the Catalog,* Emily Drabinski (2013)

highlights how information studies has become a hotspot for academics striving to critique and

improve the hegemonic library classification systems (2013).

      Within each community, terms may change rapidly. Over time, communities may settle

on a consensus for terminology and usage. The LGBTQ community continues to be in flux with

terms, and these changes can be seen over the decades in LCSH and in scholarly and popular

terminology (Johnson, 2010). Shelia Lorraine Darrow (1994) notes how quickly the Library of

Congress adapted subject headings between 1963 and 1975 to reflect the emerging fields of

research in women's studies. Although additions to subject headings often take time to develop,

Darrow's writing details how the Library of Congress' timeliness was necessary to progress the

subject headings in swift reaction to this expanding field of research.

      Although this paper touches on LGBTQ subject headings and cookery, it's important to

note that other groups have fought to achieve adequate representation in the LC and DDS subject

headings. Marielena Fina (1993) implores technical services librarians in her article *The Role of*

Subject Headings in Access to Information: The Experience of One Spanish-Speaking Patron to go beyond the standard methods of cataloging. She pushes catalogers to use Bilindex, which is a subject authority database of Spanish Subject Heading equivalents to the LCSH (Fina, 1993). In South Florida, even our voting ballots are tri-lingual, with Creole, Spanish, and English. Fina's article relays the importance of libraries using translation as a means of making the catalog accessible and meaningful to the populations they serve. It's one thing to have diversity in a collection, but another to see that those materials are searchable and displayed with intersectionality.

Subject headings have generally reflected the climate of an era, rather than the day to day weather, much like how Supreme Court rulings are based on precedent rather than day-to-day news headlines. This paper only scratches the surface of how subject headings continue to move away from antiquated terms and inadequate or demeaning language based on phobias and prejudice. As the history of LGBTQ subject headings shows, subject headings have not succeeded in creating objective categories and have often included bias. Information studies is an active arena for scholars seeking diversity, inclusion, and objectivity in classification, which in turn, better serves the users searching the collections.

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