

Change needed: unpleasant surprises in the subject index

Liz Antell, Information Assistant at City, University of London.

The Problem

In July of this year, I saw cataloguers on Twitter drawing attention to a recent LCSH revision which changed 'Mental retardation' to 'Intellectual disability'. Twitter user violetbfox wrote: "*Ask your library's cataloging folk if these changes must be made manually; if so, ask them to make it a priority.*"¹ I found her call to action inspiring – another of the many ways in which library workers are willing to share experiences and knowledge to help each other improve our services.

Around the same time, I discovered that my (now former) institution's catalogue still had subject headings containing the word 'Negro'.

Even knowing how slow LCSH were to change, I couldn't believe this was still an authorised heading – and of course, it isn't. It hasn't been since 1975.²

So what was it still doing in our catalogue?

A brief survey of other academic and research libraries in the UK revealed that this was a widespread issue. Using institution's OPACs and resource discovery tools, I conducted searches for subject headings using these outdated terms. I carried out these searches for over 50 institutions from across the UK. The results were striking. 83% of catalogues surveyed contained at least one subject heading containing the word 'Negro'.

In the majority of cases, the number of records affected was small and confined to material dating from the 1970s and before. These subject headings had been created at a time when these terms were the authorized ones, and had missed out on later updates.

Naturally there are good reasons why local subject headings are not always up to date with LCSH. Time and resources are always limited, and when headings are subject to numerous small changes over time, the benefit of constantly updating your catalogue may well not merit the effort. Ensuring that every instance of 'Cookery, French' instead reads 'Cooking, French' is hardly a high-priority. Limited resources could be better spent on many other things.

But not all heading changes are equal.

We would all hope that no one is actively searching our catalogue using the word 'Negro', but as long as subject headings containing this word remain in our records, our users may encounter them.

1. Violet Fox (@violetbfox). "Important #LCSH change alert, from 'Mental retardation' to 'Intellectual disability'. Ask your library's cataloging folk if these changes must be made manually; if so, ask them to make it a priority. #critcat #critlib". 8:33 AM, 18 July 2018. Tweet.

2. Steven A. Knowlton (2005), 'Three Decades Since *Prejudices and Antipathies*: A Study of Changes in the Library of Congress Subject Headings', *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 40:2, 130.

In a recent episode of Turbitt & Duck, Alissa McCulloch made the incisive observation that for many users, the online catalogue may be the first part of the library that they access.³ The metadata in our catalogues, we know full well, is central to resource discovery. Users go to OPACs to learn what resources they can access, and cataloguers aim to create metadata that reveals the nature, creators, and subjects of these resources. We take care to create accurate metadata because we know that errors or misleading information will hinder our users' ability to find what they are looking for. What about the impact on users of out-of-date subject headings?

In the cases of many LCSH updates, it may be a minor inconvenience only. For example, in a catalogue which indexes the old heading 'Organ – History' as well as the current heading 'Organ (Musical instrument) – History', interested users are likely to find both headings within a short period of browsing the index, since they will sit in alphabetical proximity. A keyword search for 'organ history' will return records with both headings. Users may guess when observing the split headings that one is an updated version, but even users with no contextual awareness of how subject headings are created and structured are unlikely to suffer anything more than an annoyance.

The consequences of out-of-date subject headings like 'Negroes – Great Britain' or 'American literature – Negro authors' are likely to be much worse, in at least two respects.

The Impact on Users

Firstly, we must consider the potential effect on users, especially users who are Black.

Archaic and offensive terms in book titles will likely be understood as relics of their time. Subject headings, however, represent the voice of the library. Subject headings are our authoritative statements concerning what the book is about. As Olsen puts it, "*LCSH shapes the meaning that is conveyed from a document to a user.*"⁴ As libraries, we position ourselves between resources and readers, in a role of facilitation and illumination. When we catalogue and classify and index, we say to our users: 'this is a resource about x and y'. Our catalogue speaks for us, and so we must be mindful of what it is saying.

The presence of 'Negro' and 'Negroes' in subject headings risks alienating and offending our users, especially our Black users. As Biswas argues in a critique of the LCSH 'East Indians', "*A rejection of outdated terminology is central to providing any culturally sensitive tool for resource organisation.*"⁵ There are many headings like 'East Indians' which LC still needs to be convinced to change, but 'Negroes' has long since been updated. Excising these subject headings from our catalogues is many decades overdue.

Our OPACs are one of the public faces of our libraries. If we want our users to feel welcome, comfortable, and respected in our library spaces, including our digital spaces, then our catalogues cannot contain these terms.

3. Alissa McCulloch, *Turbitt & Duck: The Library Podcast*, Episode 18. Podcast audio, 9th July 2018. 17:13-19:17.

4. Hope A. Olson (2000), 'Difference, Culture and Change: The Untapped Potential of LCSH', *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 29:1-2, 66.

5. Paromita Biswas (2018), 'Rooted in the Past: Use of "East Indians" in Library of Congress Subject Headings', *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 56:1, 1.

The Impact on Access

Secondly, we should consider the impact on resource access.

Resources on particular subjects being split between multiple subject headings disproportionately inconveniences users looking for books in these areas.

LC first changed 'Negroes' to 'Afro-Americans' and 'Blacks', and later updated the former heading to 'African Americans.' If a catalogue contains records using all these different headings, and no effort has been made to update them, this is a barrier to users successfully discovering our collections. A user interested in African American art would have to locate and browse 'Negro art', 'Afro-American art', 'African American art', and 'Black art' to find all resources on the subject. Keyword searches using current terms would be unlikely to retrieve records containing only the older headings. At best, this means the search is more time-consuming and more inconvenient for our user. At worst, this could mean the user does not discover a portion of the resources available.

The unintended (but real) consequence of this is that we create better access to some areas of our collection than others, and this better access has the potential to support existing power hierarchies. Works about white artists – or, in LCSH terms, just 'Artists' – will be easier to locate than works about Black artists.

When we make it harder for users to find material relating to historically marginalised groups, we maintain barriers to learning and research which relates to these groups.

Call to Action

The presence of certain out-of-date LCSH in our catalogues has a detrimental impact both on our users and on the learning and research our collections are used for.

We as libraries are responsible for critically analysing the statements we make, and the statements our catalogue makes for us. Language is continually evolving, and it is likely that various words that are considered appropriate now will be contested in the future.⁶ This doesn't mean, however, that changing our language now shouldn't be a priority.

We may not have the resources to ensure our subject headings are perfectly up-to-date, but we should be aware of the particular outdated headings which are more harmful. We can act to correct those, at least, and we can do that now.

6. Emily Drabinski (2008), 'Teaching the radical catalog' in *Radical Cataloguing: essays at the front*, edited by K.R. Roberto, p. 202.