

An International Cataloguing Code of Ethics?

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In the May CIG eBulletin there was a short report of an important new initiative for cataloguers.

“Hands Across the Water” – Ethics in Cataloguing Guidelines – CIG & CaMMS Joint Initiative

The June issue of *Catalogue & Index* is dedicated to Ethics in Cataloguing and there have been some wide-ranging & in depth discussions nationally recently with CILIP holding roadshows to assist with the review of our professional ethics framework. A draft document is due to be unveiled at the CILIP Conference in Brighton in July.

Similar conversations have been taking place in the United States for the last 2 years culminating in the Cataloging and Metadata Management Section (CaMMS) of **ALCTS** holding a Forum at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in February dedicated to “Cooperatively Conscientious Cataloging” #CaMMSForum. The Forum definitively established the need for more ethical guidance for cataloguers.

Both CIG & CaMMS believe that there is a requirement for specific ethics guidance for our sector of the profession because of the specialised nature of our work and the responsibility that we bear for ensuring that resources are discoverable and accessible e.g. cataloguing resources without bias or prejudice when the content may be diametrically opposed to our own culture or beliefs; subject cataloguing using controlled vocabularies whose headings and terminology may not be reflective of modern society; ensuring that we classify and categorise inclusively; encouraging Open Access & adhering to Copyright legislation.

These challenges are common to the global cataloguing community which is why, following the Forum at ALA and publication of a summary of the discussions, CIG reached out to CaMMS asking to be involved in the development of an Ethics Code of Conduct/Guidance.

On 10th April Jane Daniels & Debbie Lee attended a virtual meeting with CaMMS members, chaired by Susan C. Wynne, to commence work on this exciting collaborative project.

Preliminary discussions considered the size, composition & number of working groups (provisional themes had emerged from the Forum); calling for volunteers (no requirement for either CaMMS or CIG membership to ensure that the project is inclusive); and timescales for completing the work.

A draft Mission Statement is in preparation and approaches are being made to other national cataloguing committees & IFLA to encourage their participation.

Further project updates will follow but in the meantime please do think about the ethical dilemmas that you have faced and your strategies for resolving them. Experience gathering will be an essential component of the work that we are doing. In this way we can all contribute to the development of guidance fit for the demanding but exciting information environment that we work in.

Like most of you I work day-in-day-out with metadata but just how fundamentally important & all-pervading ethics is to our work hadn't really registered with me.

Inspired by the CaMMS discussions on ethics I have examined my own experience over the last 35 years. Here are some examples of my own dilemmas & some thoughts on how we can ensure that our records survive for the benefit of future generations – another ethical consideration.



Subject Headings – Meaningful & Appropriate?

When I started cataloguing in a public library I was puzzled by a Library of Congress Subject Heading added to the self-help books that we purchased. *Self-actualization (Psychology)* seemed indecipherable to me. Would our users find it equally puzzling? In the event the online catalogue where keyword search was king and categorisation of stock to facilitate discovery (in this case to *Health & Fitness*) meant that any problems in interpreting the subject heading were alleviated.

Now that I work in a university library I don't even think about the appropriateness of the heading because we have a Psychology section. I assume that the heading is meaningful to the user group.

Another heading that I still struggle with is *Outsider art*. “*Here are entered works on art by self-taught artists working outside of any established tradition.*” If you dig a little deeper it's used to describe works by psychiatric patients, prisoners & recluses and anyone else who sits outside the norms (whatever that is) of Society. I don't like the term “outsider” because it has uncomfortable connotations. I always try and provide more headings to add further context to the works where this subject heading has been applied.

My last “problem” heading is just an example of the different terms used in cultures to describe the same concept. In the United States “Trash” is used to describe what we in the UK would term “Rubbish.” Consequently *Trash art* is used to describe art constructed from rubbish.

I do wonder what impact the use of headings compiled in American English has on user groups around the World or perhaps Google has basically democratized language?

Content That Concerns Me

During my time in the public library I remember cataloguing a (really) graphic novel that had been purchased for junior readers. In this instance I took the decision to inform the selector, who had not anticipated the content would be so sexually explicit. We arranged for it to be moved to another area of the library and a warning label put on the cover. In this instance I felt that the book was not appropriate for children and was also mindful of the possible detrimental impact on the reputation of the service if, for example, a parent had complained about the book.

In the University we have a collection of Performance Art resources and cataloguing these can be challenging. Personally I don't like to see people hurt themselves. The notion that this can be a “performance” that people attend and by doing so encourage the artist to even greater extremes of behaviour is abhorrent to me. At the same time I have to accept that I have an ethical duty to catalogue the expressions/manifestations of these performances for the sake of future generations. What I find distasteful someone else might find intellectually stimulating and so research is conducted and knowledge obtained.

Cultural Responsibilities

When I started cataloguing in my local public library authority here in Wales I realised that there was a major problem with sourcing, or enhancing, records for Welsh and bi-lingual resources. Basically we had only one Welsh speaker on staff and there was a lack of quality records that we could download. The result was a trickle of Welsh resources to our libraries compared to a torrent of English language materials.

I felt that this was unethical. We needed to address this problem and support our devolved government in its efforts to halt the decline of our national language. I produced a report on the problems that we faced and enlisted the support of our National Library, the Welsh Books Council and the major record vendors. Thanks to a fantastic collaborative effort all libraries in Wales now have access to good quality records for download.

Problems Common to Us All & How to Deal With Them

Our ethical responsibilities do not end with the publishing of records to our catalogues. We have a duty to lobby widely and vigorously for the application of international standards for metadata creation to ensure our users get the best search experience. Records are created across the globe by libraries, vendors and publishers so we have joint responsibility for sharing & re-using them (no more silos) to expose our collections as widely as possible.

We must also maintain and enrich the records to ensure that they continue to be fit for purpose. There should be transparency around the algorithms that are used to expose the metadata in catalogues and web discovery layers and systems vendors need to work with us to drive improvements in search interfaces and to achieve efficiencies in cataloguing workflows.

More creative international collaborations and commercial licences are required to reduce duplication of effort and free up cataloguing time for legacy data improvement and cataloguing the special and rare materials that we purchase or receive as gifts or donations.

Records must be preserved for posterity and not deleted when the last copy of a work is withdrawn or a file taken down from the Web. Knowing that a resource existed and where & when it was published, even if there is no extant item, is of tremendous importance to researchers.

When we catalogue we bring a work into existence and make it discoverable across the World which is our essential contribution to the creation of an Open Society.

A *Cataloguing Code of Ethics* will provide us with an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to nurturing a free, fair and diverse Society.

So as we begin our journey towards, potentially an internationally adopted Code, please think about your own experiences - perhaps you can jot them down now - and be ready to share these with our cataloguing community.