

The Cataloguing Code of Ethics¹ was published in January 2021 and represents the culmination of a year of work by a steering committee and six working groups to respond to a need for a set of ethical principles and guidance on professional ethics for metadata workers. This article reflects on my experience as a member of one of the six working groups and explores the group's methodology and output as well as the next steps planned to incorporate the Code of Ethics into metadata processes at the University of Kent.

In April 2019, a call for volunteers to participate in an international, collaborative piece of work on ethical considerations in cataloguing was circulated via the JISCMAIL CILIP CIG mailing list. I had recently returned to metadata work from a long career break and wanted to get back into some sort of committee activity to help me get back up to speed with current thinking in cataloguing and to meet other cataloguers. I also wanted to extend the work to address bias in reading lists at the University of Kent that had recently been undertaken by library colleagues.² I had been examining instances of description and classification in our library catalogue that were outdated, and potentially offensive and harmful to our users, but wanted to be able to address these issues with professional confidence and in a way that was going to be sustainable. The call for participants in a set of six working groups investigating the ethical implications of metadata work interested me as it presented a new way of working and sharing thoughts and best practice with colleagues not just outside my own institution, but outside the UK. Applying to join one of the groups online was straightforward and in mid-June I found out that I had been assigned to the working group looking into the application of subject headings and controlled vocabularies.

The need for a code of ethics specifically for cataloguers had been discussed at the Cataloging and Metadata Management Section (CaMMS) Forums at American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Conference in 2016. Professional codes of ethics for librarians already existed, including those published by IFLA,³ the ALA,⁴ and CILIP's Ethical Framework,⁵ but none of these specifically addressed the ethical responsibilities encountered by cataloguers when describing and classifying library stock. CaMMS formed the Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee in 2016, and invited participants from CaMMS, CILIP's Metadata and Discovery Group (MDG) and the Cataloguing and Metadata Standards Committee of the Canadian Federation of Library Association (Fédération canadienne des associations de bibliothèque CFLA-FCAB). Recognising the scale of the task, the six-person Steering Committee then created working groups to investigate specific areas of interest, with their mission statement specifically requesting input from "individuals drawn from diverse geographical, ethnic and library sectors".⁶ Starting in August 2019, cataloguers from the UK worked alongside metadata workers from Canada and the United States to produce a report on their area of focus, including a literature review and case studies, with the report to be submitted to the Steering Committee in November 2019. The Steering Committee then considered the content of these reports and condensed them into a draft Code of Cataloguing Ethics, which was shared with the cataloguing communities of these three countries for comment. A second draft of the Code of Ethics followed, before the final version was published in January 2021.

¹ The final version of the Code of Ethics for Cataloguers can be viewed at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IBz7nXQPfr3U1P6Xiar9cLakzoNX_P9fq7eHvzfSIZ0/edit (accessed 17/03/21)

² <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/staff-student-news/2019/05/10/kent-wins-in-talis-awards-2019-for-diversifying-the-library-collection-with-reading-lists-project/> (accessed 18/03/21)

³ <https://www.ifla.org/faife/professional-codes-of-ethics-for-librarians> (accessed 18/03/21)

⁴ <http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics> (accessed 18/03/21)

⁵ <https://www.cilip.org.uk/general/custom.asp?page=ethics> (accessed 18/03/21)

⁶ The mission statement can be read on the Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee website: <https://sites.google.com/view/cataloging-ethics/home> (accessed 17/03/21)

The Subject Headings Working Group that I joined was made up of 16 participants, lead by Timothy Keller of Oberlin College and Conservatory in Ohio. The group was almost exclusively made up of North American participants, with me being the only representative from the UK. The Working Group was also almost entirely female in its membership, but lead by a man, a fact that reflects the gender imbalance and glass ceiling within the profession at large.⁷ We began by creating a bibliography of relevant books, journal articles and blog posts which we used as the basis for our literature review. This was done by splitting the large topic of subject headings into smaller areas for review - my subgroup looking at the creation of local subject headings; creating ethical vocabularies; the Library of Congress subject headings change procedure; and metadata we surface but cannot control (such as vendor-supplied metadata in discovery layers). Working over Zoom worked well for the group, and meetings were scheduled fortnightly at 7pm BST so that all had the opportunity to attend. It doesn't seem so exciting to be working remotely via video calls in our post-2020 world, but at the time it felt genuinely revolutionary to me! All the working groups were assigned a member of the Steering Committee as liaison, so that we had a point of contact for any queries that came up, but the information the committee had given on the working group deliverables was sufficiently detailed that we didn't need to trouble them for extra information very often. Collaborative editing of documents was carried out in Google Drive, with separate folders for each Working Group, and this generally worked well with the group setting up Google hangouts for midweek editing sessions. We quickly laid out a plan for our report using the template provided by the steering committee and began to make individual contributions as well as giving our comments on the contributions of others.

Our final report, including a literature review, methodology, case studies and bibliography, was submitted to the Steering Committee in November 2019. The original plan was for the Steering Committee to read the reports from the six Working Groups and use them to create a draft document by around March 2020. This timeline was, of course, derailed by the outbreak of COVID-19, which pushed the delivery date of the final version of the Code of Ethics for Cataloguers back by six months to January this year.

Since the publication of the Code of Ethics for Cataloguers and its presentation at a series of webinars in Canada, the UK, and the USA, I have had time to reflect on my experience as part of a Working Group and the document we helped to create. Meeting with metadata professionals from outside the UK was a great way to gain insight into metadata working practices outside the UK Higher Education echo chamber and has definitely broadened my own practice as a cataloguer. I feel more confident to attend webinars and training sessions offered by institutions such as IFLA and ALA Core now that I know where our working practices are similar and where they diverge from one another.

The reports produced by the working groups were substantial documents in their own right, concentrating on very specific areas of ethical concern. Alongside the final Code of Ethics for Cataloguers it would be beneficial to the metadata community to make some of the content of these documents more widely available. Understandably, case studies submitted to these reports may not be suitable for sharing widely (in fact the Steering Committee is currently seeking case studies to support the principles of the Code of Ethics),⁸ but the expertise and recommendations in specific areas of ethical interest would be useful to the broader profession. Additionally, the need to distil these large reports into a much smaller final document means that a lot of the fine detail on each area has been necessarily missed.

⁷ Hall, Hazel et al (2015) *A study of the UK information workforce. Mapping the Library, Archives, Records, Information Management and Knowledge Management and related professions in the United Kingdom*. CILIP/ARA.

⁸ Call for case studies <https://sites.google.com/view/cataloging-ethics/home/case-studies?authuser=0> (accessed 17/03/21)

The Working Groups were made of volunteers that expressed an interest in creating the Code of Ethics, and in that regard we were a self-selecting group, creating a bubble of like-minded people working together. This meant that there were few differences of opinion within the group, avoiding friction and enabling fast working but also potentially omitting dissenting voices. The composition of the Working Groups reflected the inequalities and demographic biases inherent in the library profession at large, being overwhelmingly made up of women. It was also exclusively made up of cataloguers working in North America and the UK, missing the opportunity to include the opinions of some of the groups we were considering. This was, of course, due to the collaborative working between the three national metadata special interest groups, but perhaps when the time comes to revisit the Code of Ethics for Cataloguers it would be worth considering how much value could be added if it were created by a more diverse and truly inclusive group of people.

The ten principles laid out in the Code of Ethics for Cataloguers will certainly present challenges for those that do not consider cataloguing to be an inherently 'political' or non-neutral act, in which it is important to consider not just our own biases but those of our library standards too. Following on from work to 'decolonise' reading lists at the University of Kent, the Metadata & Digital Curation team felt the next logical step was to examine how we describe those resources. With metadata labour largely invisible to our end-users, we wanted to think about how the way we describe our collections influences not just discoverability, but how our users feel about us as an institution. To this end, the team has been working on a set of guidelines for metadata staff called "Ethical cataloguing of marginalised voices" which makes clear statements about how we understand our role as the creators and curators of the library's metadata, and gives clear guidance on the practicalities of incorporating inherently biased standards such as Library of Congress Classification and Library of Congress Name and Subject Headings into our metadata whilst ensuring our descriptions are inclusive of, and respectful to, all. It is clear that the Code of Ethics for Cataloguers is a valuable document for the metadata community, providing a great starting point for conversations with library management on how important metadata is in demonstrating our commitment to equality and respect as higher education institutions and the potential for reputational damage if it is not given the serious consideration it deserves.