In January 2020, Cornell University Library’s Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee sponsored a library-wide screening of the documentary “Change the Subject,” which describes the challenges encountered by students and librarians at Dartmouth College who initiated an attempt to change the Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) terms related to undocumented immigrants. Following this screening, based on input from library staff at Cornell, a task force formed to consider what to do about these specific subject terms in our catalog now, and how we might address other problematic terms in the future.

This paper describes the genesis of the task force, the charge and membership, the issues the task force considered regarding the “Illegal aliens” family of subject headings, and the solution proposed. Against this contextual backdrop, we consider a framework for addressing problematic or contested subject terms, including the criteria by which we will evaluate terms, actions we will consider taking, and how to communicate with our users about subject vocabularies.

Genesis of the Critical Cataloging Working Group, its charge and membership

The Critical Cataloging Working Group charge consisted of two parts. The first was to draft a recommendation to Cornell University Library leadership to address the following terms:

- Illegal aliens
- Illegal alien children
- Children of illegal aliens
- Illegal aliens in literature
- Women illegal aliens
- Alien detention centers
- Aliens

The second was to recommend a framework and guidelines for addressing what we called “problematic” subject vocabulary in the future, including whether a permanent group should be formed, what types of terms will or will not be addressed, and what actions will be taken. This recommendation was intended to consider LCSH in traditional catalog records and other vocabularies used in descriptive metadata.

Members of the group included catalogers from the main library, the law library, rare and manuscript collections, archivists, a systems librarian, and a reference librarian.

Issues we considered around the Illegal aliens family of subject headings

The presence of the Illegal aliens family of subject headings in Cornell’s discovery environment is antithetical to the expressed morals and ethics of the Library and the University. As an institution, we take pride in being leaders in scholarship, research, and policy.
The Cornell Values statement outlines our commitment to “diversity and inclusion,” affirming that “we strive to be a welcoming, caring, and equitable community.” The Values statement defines the Cornell community as a place where “different backgrounds, perspectives, abilities, and experiences can learn, innovate, and work in an environment of respect, and feel empowered to engage in any community conversation”.

The taskforce asserted that Cornell Library’s continued use of the subject term *Illegal aliens* undermines the University’s stated commitment to support undocumented students. It creates an environment where members of the Cornell community feel unwelcome and othered. This jeopardizes the equitable community we strive for and discourages research, scholarship, and discussion. The working group agreed that the terms recommended by the ALA (American Library Association) Subject Analysis Committee in its 2016 report represented the best choice for Cornell.

In the absence of action by the Library of Congress, the group reviewed strategies used by other libraries to present controlled vocabulary alternatives to *illegal aliens*. These options included adding supplementary headings in the library’s MARC (machine-readable cataloging) records, completely replacing the authorized vocabulary in the records, or leveraging the library’s discovery layer to present the preferred terms.\(^1\) The staff responsible for managing the Solr Index that provides data to the public catalog verified that this last strategy was realistic, and the committee recommended this solution to library administration, which approved this part of the proposal.\(^2\)

Fortunately, as of January 20, 2021, we are no longer doing this work in opposition to the position of our federal government. In late February, 2021, the Biden Administration proposed the U.S. Citizen Act 2021, which includes specific changes to the legal language used in United States law to refer to non-citizens. This legislation, recently introduced in Congress,\(^3\) specifies replacing the term “alien” with “noncitizen” in the United States Code.

**Recommendations and guidelines for managing other problematic or contested subject terms**

As a rule, controlled vocabularies lag behind current usage. For LCSH, the process for proposing new or altering current vocabulary terms is inherently conservative. However, in line with the University’s stated values, descriptive terminology presented in the public catalog should, whenever possible, not be pejorative in nature.

---


\(^2\) The text of our full proposal to the administration is at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wXBqjLUUD3GKh8h-HgtYtxsqvoZNTT2L/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wXBqjLUUD3GKh8h-HgtYtxsqvoZNTT2L/view?usp=sharing)

The working group identified criteria for evaluating subject terms. These include:

- Potential to affect student body
- Pervasiveness of term
- Demonstrable societal change, making the term inappropriate
- Term is rejected by the stakeholders/community to whom it is applied
- Term is used to disempower politically or socially
- Term is potentially a polemical, rhetorical device (e.g., deliberately confusing)
- Term is obfuscating or otherwise confusing, or conflates two or more concepts
- Documented historical use of the term in an antagonistic or disempowering manner (precedent)

These criteria emerged out of multiple discussions and responses to questions such as who gets to determine what is considered hurtful, disempowering, or denigrating?

The group agreed that it is best to try to initiate changes to official, global, controlled vocabulary (e.g., LCSH) before making local changes. This strategy, while complicated and slow, benefits the larger library community. Local changes will be considered only if the proposal to change the controlled vocabulary fails. Specifically, the task force suggested the creation of an ad-hoc action team that, for any questioned or contested terminology, “will work with stakeholders (including whoever questioned the term, reference librarians, and other subject experts) to craft and submit a subject heading change proposal to the Library of Congress (or other agency), with the goal of initiating change at the national/international level to benefit the broader community of library users. Priority will be given to controlled vocabulary terms that are actively hurtful or stigmatizing to those described.”

Steps to address broader issues - Inclusive Description Task Force

This recommendation for a Cornell Library action team to facilitate LCSH new subject or change proposals addressing problematic or contested language in the catalog has been referred to a newly formed Inclusive Descriptive Practice Task Force (IDPTF). Among other aspects of a broad agenda, this group is charged with establishing a framework for evaluating, acting on, and responding to descriptive terms (e.g., subjects or names) that come to its attention as potentially problematic. Several members of the original task force are now part of this expanded effort. As of January 2021, the IDPTF is refining its charge and working on a definition of inclusive descriptive practice.

As we have found in the process of formulating our definition of inclusive descriptive practice, libraries at a number of institutions have already set the stage for a systematic review of problematic language in the catalog, by making a formal statement to announce their intentions to address this issue and the principles behind their planned response.4 The Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP) has published a highly useful guide to anti-racist archival description, Anti-Racist Description Resources (https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf).

---

One of the questions raised by all this good work is *At what level can we best work on this issue?* Will we generate the most creative solutions by working independently at the level of individual institutions, or does that risk generating redundant effort and inconsistency? If we try to coordinate this work at the national level through entities such as the Library of Congress, the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC), the American Library Association, and the Society of American Archivists, will it get bogged down or involve too few voices and perspectives? If the best way of proceeding is to strike a balance between locally generated ideas and national standards, how can we do that most effectively? Conversations within the PCC, occurring as we write this, make it apparent that this should not be an either/or strategy; a combination of local interventions and coordinated efforts toward changing the shared vocabularies used (inter)nationally are critical to making our library catalogs welcoming and useful to a diverse clientele.

How can we best reconcile the tensions between shared vocabularies and the need for localization? Are there technical solutions (alternative labels) that could be of use, for instance, to libraries wishing to display a term preferred by Indigenous peoples in their particular region instead of “Indians of North America”? Perhaps a technique at the level of the discovery layer could be used to display the common names of plants in a public library, while the academic library might prefer the established scientific names. There will always be nuances to describing specific, concrete collections that cannot be met by vocabularies designed for general, abstract ones.

Given the magnitude of the work required to review an entire catalog, we need strategies to focus our efforts. Where will our efforts be most effective in making cataloging more inclusive? The taskforce recommended taking cues from our public services colleagues and our users, perhaps creating a standard mechanism for providing feedback on language found in catalog records. The criteria outlined by the critical cataloging taskforce can then be used to “triage,” identifying the most pressing candidates for action in the form of change proposals or crafting local terminology.

Another question is how to deal with potential backlash as we introduce more inclusive terms into the catalog. The film “Change the Subject” documents the political brouhaha in Congress which stymied the efforts of the American Library Association and the Library of Congress to change the LCSH subject heading *Illegal aliens* to *Undocumented immigrants*. Are we bound to encounter more such resistance as we seek to change other offensive, denigrating, or misleading terms in the catalog? Libraries, archives, and our professional associations need to fortify ourselves with written policies which lay out the principles and reasons behind the changes we make and seek to have made. The FAQ⁵ (frequently asked questions) we created, with assistance from our library communications department, can serve as a model to provide ready responses to potential challenges or complaints. We are proposing to make changes to our cataloging language at a time when the national political divide in the United States is deep and painful, and multiple stresses are heightening the tension. That is not a reason to abandon our mission, but it is a reason to have a plan.

Libraries collectively also need to plan to fund what is necessarily a long-term and iterative process if we intend to make inclusive description a reality. The work required—to identify problematic terms, research and identify preferred language, propose changes through the Library of Congress’s Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) or the like, and to update bibliographic data accordingly—is not inexpensive. We cannot cease cataloging new acquisitions in order to take on remediation work; in fact, we may need to give more attention to newly cataloged materials as well. How can we best advocate for the value of this work? How can we cooperate further to share the benefits of what funding is available? Where can we find durable sources of funding? How can we protect this work from shifting political winds?

---

⁵ FAQ available at: [https://confluence.cornell.edu/x/3yQkFw](https://confluence.cornell.edu/x/3yQkFw)
Ethical Challenges

In working toward more inclusive cataloging, we catalogers need to recognize our own biases. This includes recognizing that we should not attempt to speak for marginalized communities, and we must not co-opt their voices. Who gets to represent these groups, and how do we prevent bias from creeping into the selection process itself? This raises the question of “literary warrant”. Its bias in favor of published texts excludes the very sources where we might find the most appropriate language to describe materials about underrepresented communities.

In beginning the work of making the catalog more inclusive, we are clearly taking on a complex challenge. But if we believe in equity and respect for all, this work is essential.

References and Links


Cataloging Lab List of Statements on Bias in Library and Archives Description, http://cataloginglab.org/list-of-statements-on-bias-in-library-and-archives-description/


Cornell Technical Services FAQ on problematic subject terms (2020), https://confluence.cornell.edu/x/3yQkFw


