Subject authority control is an essential part of everyday cataloging. Though most catalogers may not be aware of it, it goes on behind the scenes so that subject headings are accurate and precise. It does this through the use of a controlled vocabulary. Controlled vocabularies have advantages and disadvantages. Using a controlled vocabulary can improve access to items if users are aware of the controlled vocabulary and of the terms used within that controlled vocabulary. Unfortunately, this also requires controlled vocabularies to adjust with their user base as needed; to update terms as users use different terms.

The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) may be the most used controlled vocabulary within the library world. While developed at and for the collection of the Library of the Congress of the United States of America, they are used throughout the English-speaking world, and even influence the development of controlled vocabularies for other languages, such as their use in an adapted form by the National Library of Latvia (Stūrmane, Eglīte, and Jankevica-Balode, 2014, 21). However, the use of LCSH in a variety of areas with varying populations serves to increase some of the problems with a controlled vocabulary. For example, the subject heading for the indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada remains “Indians of North America” although it is widely recognized that “Indians” is not a proper term for this population. However, given that there are different accepted terms in the United States and in Canada (“Native Americans” and “First Nations”, respectively) the solution is not as simple as changing the subject heading to a frequently used term. Further problems have come to light during the Covid-19 pandemic. Here we examine some of the problems caused by subject controlled vocabularies, libraries not having controlled vocabularies, the lack of cataloging training, and the lack of understanding with authorities in general.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought other controlled vocabulary problems to light. This can be seen clearly in the terms “epidemic” and “pandemic”. These terms do not have the same meaning - pandemics are intended to represent a larger geographical spread than epidemics, which may occur in a single city. It is also true that both terms entered English at roughly the same time. There has never been a Library of Congress Subject Heading for “Pandemics” however; only for “Epidemics”. This was fine as long as searchers were primarily using the “epidemic” as their term of choice. However, while usage of epidemic and pandemic on Google searches is relatively equivalent during normal times, searches for “pandemic” have been on the rise, particularly in times of epidemics or pandemics. In 2005, at the time of the SARS outbreak, searches for “pandemic” were double searches for “epidemic”. In 2009, at the time of the H1N1 (Swine Flu) pandemic, searches for “pandemic” exceeded “epidemic” by three or four to one. March of 2020 found these search teams more used than any other time since Google Trends began collecting information in 2004, but at the peak of both terms, “pandemic” was being used almost five times as much as “epidemic”, and it has proved to have staying power, now outstripping “epidemic” by a ten-to-one margin. In adding a cross-reference for “pandemics” to the subject authority record and adding a subject heading for Covid-19, the Library of Congress did somewhat address this problem. However, the cross-reference will only work if libraries keep their authority records up to date. Furthermore, they have not updated other headings containing “epidemics” in the same way; “Epidemics in literature” still has no similar cross-reference.

However, controlled vocabulary problems and changes are not the only difficulties in dealing with subject headings. Another problem is the overall lack of training of catalogers. Fewer librarians are going into the cataloging field. That means that many times public, small, and rural libraries may have to depend on those that are less trained, or not trained at all, for their cataloging needs.
One example of this is a library system that is part of the Mississippi Library Partnership consortia. This system had a trained cataloger who trained a replacement and then retired. The replacement trained a replacement and then left. This second-generation replacement is now in charge of training other catalogers of the branch. As one can imagine, a great deal of information was lost during this process. Besides leading to general cataloging problems, the system has a small batch of local history books that require original cataloging. Original cataloging can be difficult for trained catalogers, much less those that are new to the field. To help with the problem, the consortium is now developing and providing training for these catalogers. One area focuses on subject headings, what they are and what are they used for. This is due to the fact one of the trainees mentioned she did not understand subject headings or how to create one. While this training does not take the place of a cataloging class, it is hoped that this will allow these catalogers to catalog more efficiently with fewer problems. In this instance there was a consortium available to provide training, and experienced catalogers to provide help. However, what about a library system that does not have these securities?

Some smaller libraries, which frequently serve marginalized populations, might find themselves even more marginalized by LCSH. This is not the fault of the marginalized library or the Library of Congress, but it remains an unfortunate side effect of existing systems. Updating subject headings either by changing the approved term or by adding a cross-reference requires an update of the authority record. While several vendors offer the service of updating authority records, this still requires some effort on the part of the local librarian. It also requires paying for a service that will be difficult to justify to a library board that might have little-to-no idea of what an authority record does. When dealing with shrinking budgets, it is hard to make the case that funds be re-directed from purchasing materials to an added feature which makes those materials more discoverable by patrons. By making sure items are found more easily, patrons will be happier, and staff will be able to serve their patrons better.

However, a general lack of authority understanding can also cause a great deal of problems. If a library system is not familiar with, or unaware of, authorities, they may not load them into their online catalog. In that case there are no authorities for subject headings, names, etc. to match up to. Catalogers who are unaware of authoritative names for subjects may instead use more common names and keywords. Some examples of this can be found in the world wars. The authoritative name for World War 2 is “World War, 1939-1945”. If the authorities are loaded in a library system’s catalog, both the authoritative and the common name can be searched and found. However, if they are not, then catalogers may not know to use “World War, 1939-1945”. Instead, there could be a mixture of World War 2, World War II, and the Second World War, among others. None of these would be linked to each other and could cause patron confusion and for some materials to be lost. Another example is World War 1. The authoritative name also has dates, “World War, 1914-1918”. Without proper authority files, there could be a mixture of subject headings that, instead of helping patrons find materials, confuse them instead.

To help alleviate these issues, librarians throughout the world that use LCSH need to increase their participation in the controlled vocabulary process, while at the same time keeping in mind that there will not be a single solution to these problems. Increased collaboration (such as the partnership between Mississippi State University and other libraries in the state) can help keep the authority records up to date as well as providing more training on the purpose of authority records. Perhaps the greatest help to librarians is to insist that the decision makers take into account the needs faced by the majority of libraries. All libraries face needs in the lack of money, time, and personnel. Changes within the cataloging world, while well-intentioned, serve to increase the gap between the libraries that have more and those that do not. Libraries that are more provided for are more likely to invest in an extra layer of discoverability that includes more features. This means that controlled vocabularies may play a greater role in discoverability in more deprived libraries. It is imperative that poorer libraries are given a seat at the table in maintaining the vocabulary.
The Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) was created to allow libraries to help with LCSH. Participating in the SACO program does allow for libraries to suggest changes, and the existence of e-mail lists allows librarians that do not participate in such programs to communicate with those who do and suggest changes. However, the reality is that submitting proposals to change subject headings is time-consuming and cannot be high on the priority list for many librarians, particularly in the middle of a global pandemic. This is both a positive and a negative. If it is too easy to add to and change a controlled vocabulary, the purpose of a controlled vocabulary is lost. Still, the purpose of cataloging in general, and controlled vocabularies in particular, is to improve access. If these vocabularies are instead inhibiting access, there is a definite problem. A problem which exists even when setting aside the existence of subject headings which might marginalize certain populations.

While some progress is being made there are still more problems. These observations do not cover all of the potential problems in subject authority control and the application of that control to the patron search project. However, a few observations and recommendations for future study and application can be made. Education on search strategies (both for patrons and for library staff) remains of paramount importance. Collaboration is key: smaller libraries frequently lack the time and personnel to maintain their authority files. Collaboration with a larger library can help with this and ensure that records remain up-to-date. Custom vocabularies are useful, but in developing these it is important to bring all voices to the table. This includes the voices generally overlooked in development (i.e., people of color, women, and the socioeconomically disadvantaged). Doing these things will enable controlled vocabularies, including LCSH, to serve patrons going forward.

References


