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Confusing, inaccurate, and just goofy: Author assessments of ‘Indians of North America’ cataloguing

Abstract

This short paper presents preliminary results from an interview study with authors focusing on the catalogue record of their books. Choosing works with subject headings currently considered for revision based on inaccurate terminology referring to Indigenous Peoples, we asked participants for assessments of the authenticity and accuracy of variant catalogue records. Our primary findings add to a growing consensus that the term ‘Indians of North America’ is unsuitable for subject cataloguing.

1.0 Introduction

In this project, we sought to identify moments of tension or breakdown in the operation of the library catalogue, with a focus on choices of subject terminology from controlled vocabularies. Building on and working alongside Indigenous criticisms of LCSH and similar systems (Bone & Lougheed, 2018; Dudley, 2017; Hajibayova & Buente, 2017), we focus here on how library items on Indigenous topics are represented in the catalogue. This contribution of early results from an interview study of authors complements a host of other scholarship focused on equitable and accurate description in libraries.

2.0 Related Work

This work takes place under the broader approach of critical cataloguing: an analysis of the basic assumptions and values of cataloguing focusing on how unequal distributions of power are instantiated in library systems. Critical analyses document biases present in specific systems (Billey et al., 2014; Howard & Knowlton, 2018) and provide broader findings of how knowledge organization systems commit harm (Adler & Tennis, 2013; Fox & Reece, 2012; Mai, 2016; Martin, 2021). At its most specific, critical cataloguing is an attempt to correct systemic injustices, including breaking rules tied up in assumptions about neutrality (Lember et al., 2013).

Recognizing how cataloguing systems instantiate colonial logics and violence against Indigenous Peoples, past critical analyses have been answered by the development of Indigenous-centered knowledge organization approaches (D. Lee, 2011; Littletree et al., 2020; Moulaison Sandy & Bossaller, 2017). These systems include classifications (Bosum & Dunne, 2017; Cherry & Mukunda, 2015; Doyle et al., 2015; Swanson, 2015), subject heading systems (Bardenheier et al., 2015; Doyle et al., 2015; Lilley, 2015), literacy progression (Bardenheier et al., 2015), digital libraries (Farnel et al., 2017), archives metadata (Lougheed et al., 2015), cultural and intellectual property labels (Montenegro, 2019), and adaptation of cataloguing standards (Rigby, 2015). Duarte and Belarde-Lewis (2015) outline the stages of coming to these Indigenous systems and imagining other ways of organizing: 1) Understand how colonization works, 2) Identify means to decolonize, 3) Spread

awareness of Indigenous epistemologies, 4) Build deep domain knowledge, and finally 5) Design experimental systems, theory. In this piece, we are squarely in the first stage of Duarte and Belard-Lewis’s imagining: understanding how the dominant system is an expression and a tool of colonization, even against its own logic.

Our understanding of systems like LCSH have developed through close readings of headings and their syndetic structure across their histories (Adler, 2017; Berman, 1971; Billey et al., 2014; Christensen, 2008; Dudley, 2017; Howard & Knowlton, 2018; Olson, 2000), case studies of specific headings (Lo, 2019; Watson, 2020), and user studies (Liu & Wacholder, 2017; Salaba, 2009). Author studies are rare but reveal the distance between librarians and the creators of the works they catalogue, and the potential for engaging in a dialogue over the catalogue record (Koford, 2017).

This study focuses on those ostensibly most privileged by literary warrant—the authors of the items. This is a particularly conservative approach. In accepting the principle of literary warrant that the works themselves are the primary source of evidence (Barité, 2018; Hulme, 1911), we consulted those with the best understanding of the language and content of the works: their creators. LCSH is built from the principle of literary warrant (Stone, 2000), meaning that the terminology used in published works should be the terminology used by the library catalogue to represent works on those topics (Barité, 2018).

3.0 Methods

To elicit creators’ assessments of accuracy and authenticity in subject cataloguing of their works, we began by identifying opportunities to create contrasting surrogate records for the same works using different controlled vocabularies. We identified over a thousand works published or re-published between 2015 and 2021 catalogued with LCSH terms that have recommended alternatives in the Manitoba Archival Information Network’s (MAIN) list of “Changes to the Library of Congress Subject Headings Related to Indigenous Peoples” (Bone et al., 2015). More details about this search for catalogued works is available in a previous publication (T. Lee et al., 2021).

We sought a representative sample of works and their creators to explore a wide range of topics and phenomena connected to subject cataloguing. Our initial list of works predominately featured social sciences and history, following the known bias toward viewing Indigenous peoples as historical entities (Webster & Doyle, 2008) and the relative lack of integration of Indigenous knowledge among library collections on the natural sciences. As an example, consider that *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer’s 2013 book on botany and Indigenous knowledge, is classed within History of the Americas.

For each work, we sought current contact information for creators and recruited them by email for a research interview discussing the cataloguing of their work. In the case of co-authorship, we contacted each author separately; in one case we interviewed the coauthors in a shared session and otherwise conducted separate interview sessions. We did not contact contributors of essays in collections; in the case of collections, we interviewed editors listed in the catalogue as the creators of the work.

3.1 Interviews

We contacted a total of 107 creators. Among those contacted, 38 agreed to be interviewed and returned a completed consent form; we interviewed 37 synchronously

over phone or Zoom and 1 by email. The interviews were around 30 minutes in duration and were recorded with the participant's consent. We used a semi-structured interview protocol, beginning with general questions on the participant's familiarity with cataloguing processes and the use of subject headings or keywords in their own information seeking and scholarship. The interviewer and participant then reviewed a short catalogue excerpt featuring contrasting subject headings for the participant's published work. Where available, the first record presented was the Library of Congress catalogue copy, the second the participant's immediate library (for example, the library at their university), and the third the record using additions and replacements consistent with the MAIN list and Xwi7xwa Library subject cataloguing practices. After participants gave their impressions of the provided subject cataloguing of their work, including any meaningful differences they noted among the different samples, the interview concluded with general questions about the phenomena, the participant's thoughts on the practice of subject cataloguing, and their positionality in relation to the topic of their work.

We prepared transcripts of each audio interview, sent the text transcription to the participant for verification or correction, and deleted the audio file once we arrived at an accurate transcription. We presented each participant with the typical option to be pseudonymous; for those that opted out and indicated their choice to be referred to in our study by their real names, we added their names back into the transcript at this stage. About half (20) of participants chose for us to use their real names in our analysis and writing. Here, I refer to these participants using their full names and participants represented as pseudonyms by a first name only.

3.2 Analysis

We added completed transcripts to an NVivo project for computer-assisted qualitative analysis. We used the features of NVivo to label each interview file with the participant's stated discipline or professional specialization and code full interview texts. The preliminary results presented here reflect the first pass at coding these transcripts, featuring commentary on the most prominent issue found across all interviews.

4.0 Findings

Our participants were primarily from the humanities and social sciences, with several participants belonging to academic departments of literature and creative writing (n=9), history (6), art and art history (5), and Indigenous studies (4). Other specializations represented include anthropology, archaeology, sociology, law, environmental studies, information studies, geography, and drama. Among those participants not affiliated with an academic institution were poets. The participants were mostly from Canada (n=20) and the United States (17), with one from Europe. Some participants (n=11) were members and relations of the Indigenous Peoples discussed in their work, and most of the other participants identified themselves as white settlers. Most of the works we discussed with participants were scholarly works of non-fiction. Two works were poetry.

In our initial analysis, the most prevalent issue identified across participant comments on catalogue records was the term 'Indians of North America.' Of the 1091 headings in the 2017 MAIN list of LCSH to be changed or deleted, 1038 contain the

term ‘Indian.’ For this reason, nearly every participant in the study had at least one subject heading including the term ‘Indian’ among the catalogue records they reviewed for the study. Participants’ initial reactions to the use of the term in subject cataloguing ranged from surprise to exasperated laughter to outright dismissal. For example, Margaret Noodin described the use of the term as “goofy, on all levels” and being referred to as an ‘Indian Author,’ “kind of a hoot.”

Many participants predicted the issues and constraints relevant to the continued use of “Indians” in catalogue records. They speculated that the terminology was slow to change in systems and that there would be difficulty settling on an appropriate alternative. They also anticipated problems this term creates in search and retrieval, such as Emma who explained, “teaching Indigenous history to undergraduates, it’s always a guess as to which words the cataloguer will use. I tell students, don’t just search ‘Indigenous,’ search ‘Indian,’ search ‘Aboriginal.’ You have to search them all.” Dealing with the ambiguity of the term, Paul McKenzie-Jones is accustomed to having his work being miscategorized as being about “resistance movements of people *in* India.”

Many participants noted that the use of the term ‘Indian’ on the catalogue record was inconsistent with the terminology used in the book itself and in direct contradiction to statements made, usually in the introduction to the book, about appropriate and accurate language regarding Indigenous Peoples of North America. About a book with subject headings for “Bella Coola Indians,” John Barker explained, “the introduction said so right away that the proper name is the Nuxalk Nation.”

We share these initial results as a further indication of the inappropriateness of the term ‘Indians of North America’ to catalogue works on Indigenous Peoples. This straightforward finding is consistent with analyses elsewhere; we hope that by making this point from the perspective of those most privileged by literary warrant, we can add urgency and certainty to efforts to revise these headings.

5.0 Conclusion & Future Work

The immediate next steps for this project include full coding of the interview transcripts and identification of further subject headings of interest other than those already included in the MAIN list. We will be conducting further investigation into other headings of note to the participants, tracing whether they are or have been the target of LCSH revision proposals, and providing a framework for revision proposals for those not currently under consideration. We also intend to connect back to the scholarly and professional disciplines of our participants, to communicate back to the status of subject headings relevant to their fields and the paths forward for more accurate and respectful subject description in the future.

We will work to connect this approach to ongoing work by other professional committees and researchers modifying LCSH, Canadian Subject Headings, and other vocabularies, including local library solutions similar to MAIN and Xwi7xwa Library. For now, I would like to convey my appreciation for the authors who engaged in this process and the library workers who do the difficult—and often under-resourced—work of applying controlled vocabularies to topics made marginal by colonial logics and other modes of discrimination.

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