
Institutions worldwide have been experiencing difficulties like never before when it comes to description of cultural resources. While hardly a new problem, difficulties in analysing and classifying non-European cultural resources through a framework developed from a Western organization of knowledge have reared their heads. The mismatch of commonly used knowledge organization systems (KOSs) and cultural resources has resulted in a flurry of literature touting claims of bias in KOSs, which in turn causes unequal access to information and marginalization of non-Western cultural domains. Solutions have been implemented in the form of new KOSs, designed for the collections they describe, structured around other cultural epistemologies. The literature published between 2012 and 2017 focuses on how mainstream KOSs effectively marginalize and silence certain groups, provide unequal access to resources, and how some institutions have overcome the challenges presented by these systems to achieve more equitable access to knowledge.

Bias & Marginalization

Mai (2013) asserted that “any given classification…inevitably privileges or brings into more prominence some concepts, perspectives, experiences, viewpoints or issues, and marginalizes or moves out of view others. In this sense, any act of classification unavoidably fails to do justice to at least some dimensions of that which is classified” (p. 244; see also Green, 2015). The literature documents many instances of bias and subsequent marginalization in traditional KOSs, such as the Dewey Decimal Classification System (DDC) and Library of Congress Classification (LCC) and Subject Headings (LCSH).

Cherry and Mukunda (2015) identified bias in LCC through “inappropriate, misguided and discriminatory categories and subject headings related to the Indigenous peoples of North America” (p. 549). They stipulated that revising the terminology of LCC might address issues of language bias but would not address the Western epistemological structural of LCC, which cannot be altered to allow fundamentally different epistemologies full freedom of expression. Duarte and Belarde-Lewis (2015) concluded that many of the biases identified in traditional KOSs are a legacy of colonialism, as the language of colonialism is reflected and sustained by LCC and DDC. Green and Rathbun-Grubb (2016) identified a similar bias in the Library of Congress (LC) classification of African Literary Authors as African literature continues to be classed according to the colonial geographic and linguistic divisions of Africa in 1914. They further examined the exceptions to the classification by language of literary authors and identified a bias toward Western European languages. Villanueva (2016) offered several examples of bias in LCSH, including the discrepancy between LCSH’s “headhunting” in the context of labor recruitment versus the library’s need for “headhunting” as decapitation. Diao and Cao (2016) identified cultural bias in LCC in regard to Chinese chronology and division of history and anthropology, history and prehistory, and China’s place in the European conception of chronology. Maina (2012) argued that traditional KOSs are biased toward Western classification because they were developed in a Western context.

Similarly, many authors posit that the Western bias of traditional KOSs positions other ways of knowing as inferior, further marginalizing those cultural domains (Doyle, Lawson, &
Dupont, 2015; Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015). Moulaison Sandy and Bossaller (2017) demonstrated the importance of recognizing bias in KOSs as they pointed out that the ability to identify and understand bias is a core cataloging competency as defined by the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS). Finally, Fox (2016) examined how classification systems limit identifying components and force implicit value statements through the ordering of identity markers, while the identity components that are sublimated are at once devalued and hidden. For example, a book on labor by aged, black, female slaves cannot be classed in such a way as to retain all of these identity components, and the included components must be ordered in a certain way, implying that the classification system values certain identity attributes over others.

Equal Access

Moulaison Sandy and Bossaller (2017) summarized the importance of access in the context of Indigenous cultures by declaring, “Access to indigenous knowledge is a moral imperative that can and should be addressed through library organization” (p. 141). The consensus of the literature is that marginalization and bias in KOSs results in impeded user access, especially for those marginalized cultures. Adler and Tennis (2013) state that traditional KOSs impede access to resources, and their argument is validated in the case studies of Lilley (2015), Littletree and Metoyer (2015), and Villanueva (2016). Lilley (2015) summarized the results of two studies done in New Zealand where users expressed frustration with the inadequacy of LCSH with regard to Indigenous resources. Similarly, Littletree and Metoyer’s (2015) thesaurus project was a response to the inadequacy of English language controlled vocabularies to express Indigenous philosophies and concepts, and Villanueva (2016) proposed several adaptations to cataloging practice in the Philippines in direct response to users’ observed inability to locate library resources using vernacular searches. Catalog access is not the only way that KOSs can impede access to knowledge. Several authors described how classification results in subject diaspora, where a single topic is classed across multiple class numbers, which prevents users from shelf-browsing effectively (Green & Rathbun-Grubb, 2016; Cherry & Mukunda, 2015). Lee (2015), Rigby (2015), and Villanueva (2016) also explored how library users from different cultural backgrounds may have more or less difficulty accessing information in the same KOS. Lee (2015) argued that unequal access is an ethical issue that the field of knowledge organization needs to address. Villanueva (2016) described her experience with patrons who would search the library catalog in the vernacular or in English terminology not supported by the catalog and thus the catalog did not generate the desired results. Rigby (2015) discussed the difficulty of cataloging for different degrees of language ability, in both English and Inuktitut, for library users in Nunavut.

Literary Warrant

The literature also brings the validity of literary warrant into question, especially for cultural resources coming out of a marginalized cultural context. Villanueva (2016) explained that LCSH terms are created as need arises based on a specific resource. She points toward this policy to explain the lack of subject headings relevant to her library’s collection of resources indigenous to the Cordillera region of the Philippines. Littletree and Metoyer (2015) acknowledged that the precedent of literary warrant as expressed in the catalog works against
already marginalized domains. Similarly, Lee (2015) acknowledged that literary warrant is reliant on publication, which also privileges mainstream voices and modes of thought. Doyle et al. (2015) reported that KOSs that rely on literary warrant produce classification reminiscent of colonial power relationships. Green (2015) linked the naming bias in LCSH to literary warrant, as published work often favors mainstream name forms. Moulaison Sandy and Bossaller (2017) similarly recognized the limits of literary warrant, stating, “Unless the editors in charge of the KOSs have access to Indigenous materials, there will be no literature upon which to base the warrant for the creation of concepts and terms” (p. 133). They further argued that literary warrant does not adequately account for materials that are outside of mainstream Western culture. They endorse Indigenous warrant, where vocabulary and classificatory structure are based on the epistemology of the people whose resources are being described (see also Doyle et al., 2015). Sahadath (2013) also endorsed a classification system that privileged the cultural origins of the resources.

Minimizing Harm, Maximizing Access

Adler and Tennis (2013) stated that it is the responsibility of the cataloger “to advocate for intentional and ethical knowledge organization practices to achieve a minimal level of harm” (p. 266–267). Included in the literature are several case studies from libraries that have moved beyond traditional KOSs and implemented systems that privilege Indigenous voices and epistemologies. The Xwi7xwa Library at the University of British Columbia found that a KOS that privileged the Indigenous worldview was “fundamental to effective Indigenous information and instructional services, programming, and research” (Doyle et al., 2015, p. 114). Doyle et al. (2015) further claimed that “Xwi7xwa demonstrates the value of indigenous research by making it visible and discoverable” (p. 122). Cherry and Mukunda (2015) described the implementation of the Brian Deer Classification (BDC) at the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs Resource Centre (UBCIC). They explained that the BDC, rather than attempting to encompass all facets of Indigeneity across North America, is tailored to the collection to which it is applied. The UBCIC applied the BDC both for improved organization of the collection, for which LCC was insufficient, and for improved shelf browsing, which they felt was important to their user base. Lilley (2015) described the development of a classificatory system based on the view of the Māori people of New Zealand after several studies indicated that users were frustrated with the lack of subject access provided by LCSH. The project allowed for better access to Māori resources in a way that would have been impossible with LCSH. Littletree and Metoyer (2015) developed the Mashantucket Pequot Thesaurus of American Indian Terminology both to provide better access to native subjects in mainstream controlled vocabularies and to structure the information based on Indigenous worldview. The goal of the project was to supplement LCSH for Indigenous topics. The thesaurus is based on user warrants rather than literary warrants, which were gathered through extensive communications with both native and non-native scholars across disciplines. The thesaurus is structured in the same manner as the Getty Institute’s Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), which also provides better understanding for terms in a native context (for more on the multicultural structure of the AAT, see Baca & Gill, 2015). Littletree and Metoyer (2015) believed the project to be instrumental to the access and discoverability of native resources.

Moving Forward
Moulaison Sandy and Bossaller (2017) advocated for continued modification of existing KOSs as opposed to truly individualized schemes providing access only at the local level. They recognized, however, that not all libraries have the wherewithal to modify existing KOSs to address the issues of bias, marginalization, and access. Instead, they suggested solutions such as not limiting classification to a single scheme, instead choosing classification at the collection or even item level, with the record making the actual shelf location of the item clear. Another solution they proposed is user-generated content in the form of tags to support subject analysis or other metadata that might not easily be supplied by the cataloger. A crucial element of inclusive cataloging practice is collaboration. Bone (2016) described the efforts of the working group at the Association for Manitoba Archives when deciding how to modify LCSH terms to apply to the indigenous peoples of Manitoba. The working group spent “months analysing, debating, and consulting with Indigenous experts, both local and from around the world” (p. 2) before finalizing its recommendations, which were then sent to still more Indigenous leaders from communities across the province for even more feedback. The Māori controlled vocabulary was developed in conjunction with the Māori Language Commission (Lilley, 2015). Farnel et al. (2016) worked closely with the Inuvialuit Settlement Region’s communities to develop appropriate metadata for their digital library collection; the project was “driven by the needs and interest of the community” (p. 4). Although thus far only preliminary metadata has been recorded, the project continues to work with the community to ensure the final metadata conforms to the community’s expectations.

Conclusion

While bias, marginalization, impeded user access, and issues of warrant will doubtlessly continue to plague catalogers, the need to acknowledge and minimize the effects of bias in the library catalog has become an ethical issue (Lee, 2015). While all classificatory systems have bias by nature, catalogers can employ flexibility and creativity in their work to minimize the ontological violence often caused by language bias (Mai, 2013; Tennis, 2013; Tennis & Adler, 2013; Diao & Cao, 2016; Green, 2015). Collusion with marginalized user domains along with an understanding of how traditional classification often impedes information access for these domains can help catalogers work for cognitive justice in cataloging (Bone, 2016; Sandy & Bossaller, 2017).
Works Cited


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