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Comparing the Cataloguing of Indigenous Scholarships: First Steps and Findings

Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of data collected on the continued prevalence of outdated, marginalizing terms in contemporary cataloguing practices, stemming from the Library of Congress Subject Heading term “Indians” and all its related terms. Using Manitoba Archival Information Network’s (MAIN) list of current LCSH and recommended alternatives as a foundation, we built a dataset from titles published in the last five years. MAIN’s list contains 1,091 LCSH relating to Indigenous Peoples, ranging from demographic descriptors (e.g. Ojibwa Indians.) to broader concepts such as legal matters and literature (e.g. Ojibwa philosophy.). This dataset shows a wide distribution of LCSH used to catalogue fiction and non-fiction, with outdated but recognized terms like “Indians of North America—History.” appearing the most frequently and ambiguous and offensive terms like “Indian gays.” appearing throughout the dataset. This paper discusses two primary problems with the continued use of current LCSH terms: they are ambiguous and limit the effectiveness of an institution’s catalog, and these terms do not reflect the way Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and communities in North America prefer to represent themselves as individuals and collectives. These findings support those of parallel scholarship on the effects of knowledge organization practices on works on Indigenous topics and provide a foundation for further work. The initial findings of our research suggest that these terms have continued to be used heavily across North America in the last five years, regardless of evolving scholarship and increased representation of Indigenous authors in both popular and scholarly publishing.

Introduction

Librarians and academics working outside the realm of Indigenous knowledge organization may view subject headings applied to works as imperfect tools to accomplish the goals of a catalogue, or they may ignore them altogether. However, it has become increasingly apparent that the subject headings applied to works of Indigenous scholarship are often inaccurate, inappropriate, and misrepresent the identities and work of these authors. The continuation of these harmful cataloguing practices only serves to reflect and instantiate discrimination present in the rest of American and Canadian society.

We present quantitative research findings generated from analysis of the use of outdated, marginalizing terms used in contemporary cataloguing practices stemming from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) related to Indigenous Peoples. As alternate, community-informed cataloguing practices have gained traction in recent years, particularly in Canadian academic institutions, terms from alternate knowledge organization systems such as the Brian Deer Classification contrast sharply with the outdated terms present in Library of Congress systems.

Seeking to explore recent use of LCSH relating to Indigenous Peoples in the cataloguing of works published in the last five years, we collected catalogue records containing LCSH that Indigenous-centered cataloguing practices replace with alternate vocabularies. We then analyzed a representative list of recent publications about Indigenous topics, their applied LCSH, and their applied alternate terms. The Library of Congress (LoC) catalogue and two additional library catalogues, the Los Angeles (LA) County Library and the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) X̱wi7̱wa Library, were used to compare and contrast the use of terms assigned to titles.

The primary takeaway of this research process has been the surprising frequency with which outdated terms from the LCSH thesauri are used to catalogue current works, with specific examples pointing to the issues created by the persistence of these terms. These findings constitute a critical, early step towards larger-scale scholarship on the effects of knowledge organization practices on works by and about Indigenous Peoples.

Related Work

There were many paths into this study, and we build upon a foundation of decades of scholarship on Library of Congress Subject Headings (Biswas, 2018; Bone & Lougheed, 2018; Dudley, 2017; Hajibayova & Bunte, 2017; Howard & Knowlton, 2018; Olson, 2000), equitable cataloguing practices (Adler & Tennis, 2013; Billey et al., 2014; Fox & Reece, 2012; Lember et al., 2013; Mai, 2016; Martin, 2021), and Indigenous knowledge organization (Bardenheier et al., 2015; Bosum & Dunne, 2017; Cherry & Mukunda, 2015; Duarte & Belarde-Lewis,

2015; Farnel et al., 2017; Lee, 2011; Lilley, 2015; Lougheed et al., 2015; Montenegro, 2019; Moulaison Sandy & Bossaller, 2017; Rigby, 2015; Swanson, 2015). Questions about the usefulness and usability of cataloguing terms and practices are also foundational to our research.

Librarians and those working in knowledge organization have had questions and reservations about LCSH relating to people since the 1970s (Berman, 1971) and have articulated problems of representation in cataloguing since the turn of the century (Olson, 2001). When reviewing these works, it is striking how slowly this governing body of North American knowledge organization is willing (or able) to change to reflect the lived experiences of individuals, the needs of searchers, and the intentions of authors whose work is being catalogued (Baron and Gross, 2021).

Looking to the future of cataloguing practices, the examination of how communities made marginal are represented in the terminology of subject headings is an important practice informing the revision of systems and the provision of information literacy services (Roberts & Noble, 2016; Howard & Knowlton, 2018). Indigenous knowledge organization topics in cataloguing practices have become prominent areas of research in the last ten years with conversations going on much longer (Duarte, 2015). This is especially evident in the work being done at the X̱wi7̱wa library to Indigenize their records (Doyle, 2015) and at the University of Manitoba by the Association of Manitoba Archives (Bone, 2015).

Positionality

This research was conducted through UBC by Masters of Library and Information Studies graduate research assistant, Tamara Lee, in partnership with Sarah Dupont and under the supervision of Dr. Julia Bullard. The first author, Tamara Lee, is of settler heritage and is a newcomer to Canada from the traditional lands of the Multnomah Peoples.

The second author, Sarah Dupont, is the Head Librarian of the X̱wi7̱wa Library. She is of Métis and settler heritage and proudly oversees the Indigenous Librarianship activities that take place at this unique branch, which is the only stand-alone library at an academic institution in Canada that is dedicated to Indigenous collections. This research project is aligned with and supports the core research interest of the library: to Indigenize cataloguing and classification practices for Indigenous collections. The third author, Julia Bullard, is a faculty member leading the overall research project, “Subject description from the margins: Indigenous and Canadian scholarship.” Dr. Bullard is a settler-scholar who grew up in Coast Salish territories and in Mi'kma'ki. For her, this project is a contribution to the ongoing assessment and revision of subject description approaches entangled with colonial projects and perspectives.

We were particularly well situated to examine the records of UBC libraries, in particular X̱wi7̱wa, to consult with both X̱wi7̱wa's specialized cataloguer and the head of UBC's technical service department. Our placement within UBC's academic libraries made these cataloguing processes particularly clear, though we recognize the importance of the work being done at the Library of Congress, OCLC, and public libraries more broadly. To augment our view from within an academic library system, we sought input from a lead cataloguer in the Los Angeles County Library system.

Methods

In 2015, the Association of Manitoba Archives published a list of LCSH relating to Indigenous Peoples and suggestions for replacement in the Manitoba Archival Information Network (MAIN) database. The MAIN team has continued to revise this list and added an updated and annotated version in 2017 (Bone, 2018). Our dataset is built from the foundation of MAIN's list of current LCSH and recommended alternatives. This list contains 1,091 LCSH relating to Indigenous Peoples, ranging from demographic descriptors (e.g. Ojibwa Indians.) to broader concepts such as legal matters and literature (e.g. Ojibwa philosophy.).

To build our dataset, we began with MAIN's list, and used Worldcat.org to search each of these subject headings, and record relevant results. To limit the results of this process, only titles published or re-published between 2015 and 2021 were included, anticipating new practices following the 2015 publications of the first MAIN list of alternate terms and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (TRC, 2015). Findings were limited to the first five pages of results (where applicable) and sorted by relevance, with scholarly works and creative nonfiction more often selected than fiction, reflecting the practice of many libraries to not fully subject catalogue fiction. This gave us an up-to-date view of how these LCSH are being used by libraries today. In the interest of

relevance, results were also filtered to only include titles written in English, French, and Spanish, which would account for the experiences of cataloguers working in North America. Using these criteria, we gathered title information from the first five pages of Worldcat search results, recording both the number of results available, and a selection of titles (typically between 5 and 10) for later examination. Figure 1 illustrates an example of a beginning search strategy.

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Advanced Search Search Clear

Enter search terms in at least one of the fields below

Subject:

Title:

Author:

Popular Limits (optional)

Open Access

Narrow your search (optional)

Year
Return only items published from to:
e.g. 1971 e.g. 1977

Audience
Return only items for the audience

Content
Return only items with the content

Format
Return only items in the format

Language
Return only items in the language

Search Clear

Figure 1: Search strategy captured from Worldcat.org

The advantage of using Worldcat for this research is the ability to account for variations in LCSH use across Canada and the United States. Due to the interconnectivity of academic and public library cataloguing thanks to common practices surrounding OCLC and the prevalence of copy cataloguing, getting results from the wide variety of institutions that Worldcat aggregates was of particular interest for this project. As we will discuss later, any size or type of institution can make an impact on the perpetuation of problematic LCSH.

The second part of this research consisted of selecting LCSH and titles from the first dataset, and then looking at those titles individually to see how they were catalogued at three different institutions: The Library of Congress, The LA County Library, and X̱wi7̱wa Library at the University of British Columbia (our home institution). These three institutions were chosen for their ability to represent different types of library organizations--governmental, academic, and public.

The LoC catalogue was the ideal starting point for this project, as we are examining the use of LCSH across titles and catalogues. Smaller libraries with limited technical service staff often copy catalogue directly from LCSH, particularly in the United States. As the library which represents and serves the United States government, changes to LCSH can be hard-fought and politically charged (Baron, 2021).

Situated on the UBC Vancouver campus, X̱wi7̱wa Library is Canada's only academic library branch dedicated to Indigenous collections, and serves not only UBC as a whole, but the Indigenous communities of British Columbia and beyond. X̱wi7̱wa is also unique because it is fortunate to have an in-branch cataloguing specialist who oversees the cataloguing of new materials using a variation of the Brian Deer Classification System and a local thesaurus. While X̱wi7̱wa has a relatively small staff, the unique opportunities afforded by the collection and institutional mandate lead to passionate and community-engaged work.

The LA County Library system is one of the most popular and widely used in the United States (Orleans, 2018). We chose this institution as a fairly representative example of a large public library system with a robust online catalogue. In addition to this, the LA County Library branches include the American Indian Resource

Center¹. Founded in 1979, the AIRC's mandate is to serve the informational needs of LA County's Indigenous communities, and currently houses a robust collection of Indigenous scholarship, along with popular fiction and non-fiction.

The "comparative cataloguing" portion of our data spreadsheet is organized by LCSH > Title > LOC catalogue record > X̄wi7̄wa catalogue record > LA County Library catalogue record. By copying the subject headings listed on each title's record across institutions into this spreadsheet, we were easily able to see any similarities and differences between the three records.

The goal of this stage of research was to create a useful list of titles representing a wide variety of knowledge on Indigenous subjects, to be used in support of ongoing research being conducted by Dr. Julia Bullard and Sarah Dupont. Titles were selected to have their records compared based on gathering a diversity of subject matter and Indigenous knowledge, from history to natural sciences, along with poetry and memoir.

Findings

The initial findings of our research suggest that these terms have continued to be used heavily across North America in the last five years, regardless of evolving scholarship and increased representation of Indigenous authors in both popular and scholarly publishing.

Approximately 1/8th of the 1,091 LCSH examined yielded no results, no results in English, or were entirely limited to government documents such as acts of the United States Congress. Considering that the Library of Congress operates in support of the legislative branch of the United States government, some of these limited results were unsurprising. The majority of the LCSH yielded between 5 and 5000 titles. Keeping in mind that these results are limited to publication titles catalogued in the last 5 years, this represents a significant number of scholarly, creative nonfiction, and fiction titles catalogued with subjects that include the inappropriate term, "Indians--". These subject headings are still being deployed frequently, thereby perpetuating outmoded academic and public language even in new works that have been catalogued for the first time in 2020 and those are forthcoming in 2021/2022.

Figure 2 lists the MAIN headings retrieving the most search results within our constraints. Some of the most heavily used LCSH from the MAIN list are related to the arts and social sciences, along with a few that relate to specific nations or peoples.

	A	B
1	Results	LCSH
2	3992	Indian literature
3	3883	Indians of North America--History
4	2511	American literature--Indian authors
5	2433	Indian art
6	2024	Athapascan Indians
7	1947	Indian children
8	1714	Indians of North America--Fiction
9	1509	Algonquian Indians
10	1464	Indian authors
11	1260	Indians of North America--Government relations

Figure 2: The 10 most frequently occurring LCSH from MAIN's list.

Beyond the most frequently occurring LCSH, there was a wide distribution of terms used, surfacing numerous terms with complex issues adding to those associated with the core term "Indian." The most common results (mode) ranged between 20 and 40, with a small but consistent long tail of LCSH search results through the hundreds and thousands (Figure 3). The sheer number of results returned in this research process suggest an ever increasing number of titles being published by Indigenous authors and on Indigenous subject matter in North America.

¹ <https://lacountylibrary.org/american-indian-resource-center/>

However, the continued use of these ambiguous or inappropriate LCSH to catalogue this work suggest our practices within libraries have not necessarily caught up with this forward momentum of Indigenous scholarship and art.

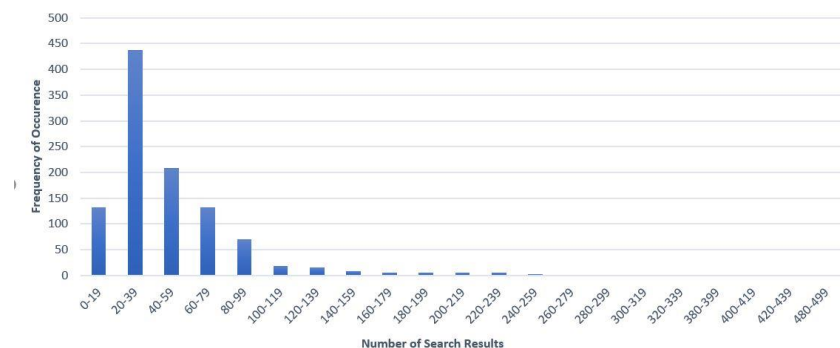


Figure 3: Distribution analysis of search results.

Discussion

The beginnings of this research process were marked with professional dismay due to the consistent over-representation of problematic LCSH applied to contemporary publications by and about Indigenous Peoples. This was followed by a renewed sense of value for this research, as it clearly sheds an important light into a dark corner of North American cataloguing practices imposed on Indigenous scholarship. The use of these LCSH is problematic for a myriad of reasons, but two primary concerns emerge for those working at the intersections of knowledge organization and Indigenous scholarship.

The first of these concerns is a practical one: “Indians” is an ambiguous term, and inevitably leads to miscataloguing. One subject heading that had particularly problematic results was “Indians---Food.” This yielded nearly 1,000 results, but included a mixture of cookbooks and food memoirs about the cuisine of the South Asian country of India, in addition to the intended subject of Indigenous food. A similar problem arises with other terms which begin with “Indian” including “Indian cooking” which does not yield any results relating to Native American or Indigenous cooking until the second page of results on Worldcat. While these are examples which almost humorously attract ambiguity and catalogue-user confusion, there are a number of LCSH being actively used which are more deeply problematic in their implications. The following are examples of two terms which appeared with relative frequency in Worldcat searches, but present different facets of the problems shared among many of the terms on MAIN’s list of LCSH.

“Indian Gays”

According to our survey of Worldcat.org, the term “Indian Gays” was used to catalogue 45 books in the last five years. Considering how relatively small but vibrant the field of queer Indigenous scholarship and writing is, it is conceivable that this number represents a fairly high proportion of books catalogued about Indigenous queer and Two-Spirit issues. Looking at this subject term, it is a combination of two ambiguous and borderline-offensive labels. As previously discussed, “Indian” is not an academically or popularly accurate term for the Indigenous Peoples of North America, nor is “Gay” commonly used in scholarship of media to describe the incredible diversity of experiences and identities of the LGBTQ2S+community (Edge, 2019).

“Ojibwa Indians”

In conversation with the cataloguing team at Xwi7x̱wa library, we discussed the problem of the term Ojibwa Indians, along with its narrower and broader terms, which are sometimes used as a blanket term for Anishinaabe peoples, which include Ojibwa, and other First Nations across Canada and the United States (Anishinaabek Nation, 2020). Reducing over a dozen distinct nations and language groups to variant terms under “Ojibwa Indians” is detrimental to both Indigenous representation and the usability of a given catalogue.

The second concern arises from the fact that these terms do not reflect the way Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and communities in North America prefer to represent themselves as individuals and collectives. It has been decades since “Indian” was an academically or socially accepted demographic marker for Indigenous Peoples and the term contrasts sharply with those in the titles and content of the works themselves. Within these works, experts explain there is simply no reason to refer to Indigenous Peoples as “Indians,” except specifically when cataloguing works related to “The Indian Act” or similar historical legislature (Younging, 2018).

In a related problem, by comparing the works which appear in relation to these LCSH, their titles, the positionality of their authors, and the contents of the works themselves, we noticed a frequent disconnect between the terms used to catalogue these works and the works themselves. To begin to observe this phenomenon, we looked at what we referred to as “meta-texts” or, titles about the particular problems surrounding the representation of Indigenous knowledge and communities in the English language. These texts were *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit issues in Canada* by Chelsea Vowel and *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples* by Greg Younging. By looking at the contents of these books, one can see a disconnect between LCSH and the work of these authors. Younging’s book includes an “Inappropriate terms” section explaining many terms and discourages the use of the term “Indian.” Vowel’s chapter on names for Indigenous Peoples carefully navigates between many terms, their geographies, contexts, histories, connotations, and uses. On the term “Indian” she states, “avoiding this term is probably for the best, unless someone is specifically referencing the *Indian Act*” (p.9). Despite this, the first term in the LoC record for the latter title is “Indians of North America--Canada.”

However, examples of progressive, community-affirming cataloguing practices continue to emerge, exemplified by some records at Xwi7x̱wa, and LA County Library which point to the possibility for effective, localized approaches to cataloguing Indigenous works. Some of these possibilities appear completely outside the influence of the LoC, as many smaller presses and/or Canadian titles do not appear in the LoC catalogue or were first catalogued by other agencies. The title *Reawakening Our Ancestors' Lines: Revitalizing Inuit Traditional Tattooing* by Angela Johnston is an excellent example of this potential. At UBC’s Xwi7x̱wa Library and at LA County Library, this title is catalogued with the following subject terms:

Xwi7x̱wa Library---

Subject(s): [Tattooing--Canada, Northern.](#)
[Inuit women--Canada--Social life and customs.](#)
[Inuit--Canada--Social life and customs.](#)
[Inuit women--Canada.](#)

LA County Library---

Subject Term: Tattooing -- Canada, Northern.
 Tattooing -- Canada, Northern -- Pictorial works.
 Inuit women -- Canada -- Social life and customs.
 Inuit women -- Canada, Northern -- Social life and customs.
 Inuit -- Canada -- Social life and customs.
 Inuit women -- Canada.
 Indigenous art -- Canada, Northern.
 Indigenous art.

These records include subject terms that are more appropriately representative of the author’s work and the discovery terms that users are more likely to search for and engage with this work.

As previously discussed, Xwi7xwa Library is Canada's only Aboriginal academic library branch, and also serves the information needs of the Indigenous community. Similarly, LA County Library is home to a unique branch, the American Indian Resource Center, which contains a remarkable collection of Indigenous scholarship and local resources and information. Because of the mandates of these two library branches, their cataloguing practices of Indigenous titles are often nuanced, carefully considered, and center the experiences of Indigenous peoples and individuals. In the example above, the use of the specific term "Inuit" is critical, as it demonstrates a deeper understanding of the book's subject matter and ties to a specific community in a way that broader terms like "Indians of North America" or even the more appropriate "Aboriginal Canadians" would not accomplish.

In conversation with the LA County Library lead cataloguer Jennifer Love, we discussed the importance of subject knowledge and community partnership, and Love emphasized how these two principles are central to how they undertake cataloguing across the branches. Unlike Xwi7xwa, the American Indian Resource Center does not have its own cataloguing team. However, the fact that they do not have these additional resources is in many ways encouraging for other institutions interested in pursuing more equitable cataloguing practices---a library staff with a commitment to do this work is all that is initially necessary. Because of how interconnected and accessible our catalogues have become via online catalogues; changes made at a single institution and will have effects locally and throughout the global network of libraries. Even apart from directly influencing other libraries through copy cataloguing, making local changes to problematic subject headings can empower other libraries to do so, as observed among the many libraries implementing alternatives to "illegal aliens" in their catalogue records (Fox et al., 2020).

Future Work

The resources created through this project have already begun to be implemented in a larger research undertaking, funded through SSHRC. In the ongoing next portion of this project, research team members are interviewing authors to discuss how subject headings applied to their works in the catalogue do or do not appropriately represent the content of those works. As part of these interviews, participants are presented with examples of different catalogue records of their work. Initial finding of this work suggested that authors are frequently concerned that the contents of catalogue records of their work are not always representative of the work itself. While this research is ongoing, requests for interviews have been met with overwhelming interest and engagement from authors, and we are looking forward to analyzing these interviews further.

While the work discussed in this paper was originally intended as foundational data gathering, the results proved surprising and more generative than we would have originally thought. As the next steps of this research progress throughout 2021, some additional work will be necessary before making this dataset a shareable document for others to refer to. Additionally, it should be noted that the data presented here only reflects a snapshot in time, and the results would undoubtedly be slightly different if conducted at different times, due to a number of factors, including continued cataloguing of new works, and changes to Worldcat.org.

Conclusions

Cataloguers have opportunities to make choices that reverberate through their own institutions and beyond, and as this data begins to demonstrate, continuing to use marginalizing subject headings for specific titles can turn into a larger problem. Outmoded and offensive subject headings, such as "Indians of North America" and related terms, not only contribute to the marginalization of the demographics they describe, but also impede the findability of these materials. The continued use of these LCSH has a professional and personal impact on Indigenous scholars and scholarship (Cherry, 2015).

The prevalence of LCSH across records has much to do with smaller institutions copy cataloguing new titles directly from LoC. If the precedent is set by LoC, few libraries, museums, or archives, have the resources to change them. Those of us working in the confines of the LCSH thesaurus may feel that our options for cataloguing Indigenous scholarship and writing are limited. However, existing approaches at libraries leading this work indicate steps that change the character of the catalogue and the representation of individual works: look for ways to use the most specific identity terms possible to avoid overgeneralized and marginalizing terms and improve findability. We point to the existence of these library records to recognize the importance of the work behind them, to note the possibility of diverging from established practices, and to suggest a wider scope in finding existing records for works on Indigenous topics.

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Local cataloguing work, supported by institutional funding, informed by and with the input of Indigenous partners, is the foundation of better subject description in this area. The current work, which contrasts a standardized approach and newly established alternatives, would not be possible without the years of relationship building and informed labour by teams such as MAIN's. An area for future study and organizing is the number of libraries that would be interested in changing from the problematic LCSH to more respectful terms if given the resources to do so.

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