Social Criticism of Four Major Knowledge Organization Systems

An Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction and Scope

This bibliography covers criticism of bias in the four major knowledge organization systems currently in use in the majority of libraries across the globe. They are the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), and the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). The articles listed were published between 2000 and 2011. In spite of a relative slow-down in research in this time span, it was chosen to both provide the most recent research and to reveal changes to the systems made since the criticism hey-day of the 1970s and 1980s. One article emphasizes the impact on multidisciplinary research. However, most other articles discuss the bias’ impact upon specific linguistic, regional, ethnic, racial, historical, gendered, and sexual communities. Most articles also utilize prior critiques in their analyses and several employ established critical theories. Three articles track progress since the 1970s and provide foundational vocabulary. All articles were published in English language journals within the Library and Information Sciences discipline, except one that has a multidisciplinary focus on social criticism.

Description

The Library and Information Science community has been vociferously criticizing LCSH, LCC, DCC, and MeSH for biased terminology since social criticism of all sorts began in earnest: the 1960s. Amidst the cultural and political revolutions around the world, thinkers and scholars developed critical theories to help model the old ways as bridges to new. These theories—including postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory—began to be applied to most Western institutions and discourses. Library and Information Science has not been immune, and many of its scholars, some of which
are profiled here, have subjected the Western discourses embodied by the aforementioned knowledge systems to similar critiques. The biases revealed in this research are grouped by Olson and Schlegl as “treatment of the topic as an exception, ghettoization of the topic, omission of the topic, inappropriate structure of the standard, and biased terminology” (2001). Current concerns about the globalization and amplification of the biases as these systems are exported through the Internet, gives continuing urgency to this research.

Summary of Findings

The rich history of criticism of these systems essentially began in when Sanford Berman wrote his groundbreaking 1971 book, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*. Often cited and the basis of much subsequent research including Knowlton’s (2005), Berman is considered a pioneering critic of subject access bias. Hope A. Olson, who has prolifically criticized all the systems since her seminal 1996 dissertation, *The Power to Name: Marginalizations and Exclusions of Subject Representation in Library Catalogues*, is the current leading proponent. Her work with Schlegl (2001) shows no fewer than ninety-three critiques that have been written between the 1970s and 1999 (p.66; p.71).

Each article claims that the systems wield considerable cultural influence and authority, and are therefore valid targets for their critiques. Many describe the systems’ global reach and bibliographic ubiquity, but none more passionately than Kua (2004): “When an organization scheme [like *DDC*] is used in 200,000 libraries in 135 countries and over 30 languages…there is cause for concern” (p.257). Furthermore, in reference to cultural influence, Kua (2004) implores, “What does it say to a child, when all the categories in a system seem to accentuate what is not yours, while all the practices and wisdom of your culture are relegated to a tiny sliver of space?”
(p.256). Knowlton (2005) describes the overall cultural impact when he states that these systems “can make materials hard to find for other users, stigmatize certain groups of people with inaccurate or demeaning labels, and create the impression that certain points of view are normal and others unusual” (p.125).

Scholarship is affected as well, particularly as more and more areas of study become multidisciplinary in nature, such as Women’s Studies. According to McTavish, Neal & Wathen (2011), biased terminology and inappropriately neutral language in the systems “impede our ability to access ‘evidence’ and hence create new knowledge” (p.382).

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) communities that have established library collections are also finding fault with the systems (Christensen, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Roberto, 2011). It’s notable that the topic of LGBTQ criticism of bias is represented by the highest percentage of articles here, perhaps symbolizing the prevalence of the topic in American discourse today, whereas the single article remotely centered on women’s issues approaches the topic from a scholarly rather than feminist perspective.

It’s not to say that feminist critiques are absent from the entire body of literature; Olson herself has written extensively from this perspective, just none were found from within the last twelve years. Another surprisingly scarce topic of critique is race, but the same holds true: much has been written, but little besides Furner (2007) recently. The relative recent lack of feminist, racial, and religious criticism may be attributed to the strides made in response to works such as Berman’s and Joan Marshall’s 1977 landmark feminist critique, On Equal Terms: A Thesaurus for Nonsexist Indexing and Cataloging, both of which in turn spurred the formation of interest groups and committees whose pressure has had an impact (Furner, 2007, p.152; Knowlton, 2005, p.125).
Five distinct post-colonial regions and their peoples are discussed: the Caribbean (Algier, 2001), Africa (Kua, 2004), Latin America (McKennon, 2006), the American Southwest (Strottman, 2007), and the Native American and Aboriginal communities of North America (Kam, 2007). The authors note that as these cultures have gained national and/or cultural independence and the means of determining their own discourse, the cataloging and classification systems have not kept pace. The five critiques show that these systems serve as both unwanted hegemonic control structures as well as necessary cultural tools.

While other articles apply critical theories in their discussions (Olson, 2000; McTavish et al., 2011) Furner’s argument, more than the others, shows the link between his criticism and social criticism at large (2007). His use of critical race theory in his discussion of DDC’s attempt at neutrality highlights a significant source of conflict within contemporary society around the topic of race. Similarly, Christensen illustrates the constant state of tension in the LGBTQ community between the desire for social assimilation and for visibility (2008).

The conclusions reached by the authors are an interesting assortment. Notably, most articles give the four knowledge organization systems considerable credit by recognizing that some changes have been made over the last forty years, the inherent difficulty of fitting continually fluctuating terminology into necessarily rigid models, and the financial and other deterrents to making sweeping changes and to developing alternatives or adaptations. The solutions they propose range from calling on others to be cognizant of bias when cataloging, changing subject heading creation methodology (Olson, 2000), adopting new technologies (Johnson, 2010), and creating local adaptions (Kam, 2007; McKennon, 2006).

Most of the articles bemoan the relative “dearth” of current research (Kua, 2004, p.264). Olson and Schlegl (2001) attest that this deficiency reflects the problem of bias itself: the
research is there, just difficult to find (p.62). However, most of the articles strongly appeal for future research in order to, if not improve the systems, then to create new bridges from them using technology such as social tagging and faceted classification.

Entry 1:

Abstract: “The Caribbean, since its discovery by Spain, has been a dynamic economic, political, and geographical environment. This is due, in the main, to the European powers who settled the area, and to the recent clamor of the Caribbean peoples for independence. Changes in domination resulted in differing nomenclature and regional boundaries. This article analyzes these discrepancies and relates them to the Library of Congress classification schedules and to headings in the Library of Congress authority file. It is clear that the schedules and headings are in need of revision.”

Annotation: The article draws upon scholarship of Caribbean history from the 14th century to its postcolonial contemporary period and Library of Congress literature to argue that in light of the Caribbean region’s historical geo-political instability and its recent postcolonial independence, the terms and classifications used to describe it in the LCSH should be changed. The author recognizes that the various nomenclatures used in this 700 year period created the confusion, but stresses that as a record of authority for scholarship, the LCSH has the responsibility to address the issue in the ways the author prescribes.

Authority: At the time of the article’s publication, Algier was the Head of Serials, Santa Clara University, California.

Scholarly/Refereed Status: Cataloging & Classification Quarterly is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to Ulrich’s Global Serials Directory and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review articles on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

Search Strategy: I searched the LISTA thesaurus for “subject headings, Library of Congress” then ANDed it with author-supplied keywords from LISTA’s index for terms and phrases starting with the term “future.” The search was further limited by published years of 2000-2012 and by scholarly articles.

Database: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

Search method: Controlled vocabulary search and keyword search
**Search string:**
DE "SUBJECT headings, Library of Congress" AND ((ZW "future bibliographic control") or (ZW "future of cataloging") or (ZW "future predictions") or (ZW "future prospect") or (ZW "future trends"))
Limiters - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Publication Date: 19900101-20121231

**Entry 2:**

**Abstract:** “In 1990 Ellen Greenblatt published a study of gay- and lesbian related terms in the Library of Congress Subject Headings. No such study has been published since, nor has such a study been conducted on the Library of Congress Classification system. This article returns to Greenblatt’s LCSH study to see what progress has been made in the last two decades, then uses her study as a template to examine gay- and lesbian-related terminology in LCC. Greenblatt’s objections to then-current headings are examples of a tension defined in the research of Eve Kosofsky and later Grant Campbell: between a ‘universalizing view,’ which values unmarked representation of all parts of the population as a whole, and a ‘minoritizing view’ like Greenblatt’s, which values visibility for the minority ‘at any cost.’ Catalogers and classificationists should be aware of this tension and respectful of current preferred usage of the minority group being represented.”

**Annotation:** In order to argue that LCSH and LCC should reflect the currently used classifying terms within the lesbian and gay community, the article compares Greenblatt’s criticisms of LCSH in 1990 to its current headings, to the current LCC Schedules, and to Campbell’s concepts of “minoritization vs. universalization” as applied to homosexuality. In light of the trending self-classifications within the LGBT publishing community, Christensen argues for unambiguously inclusive subject headings and classification schedules in reference to gay and lesbian literature, and therefore favors bibliographic visibility. Recognizing the impossibility of any classification system to adequately and consistently represent the fluid nature of community identity, he praises LC for incorporating cooperative cataloging programs.

**Authority:** Christensen holds an MLIS from the University of Washington and is a former reference librarian. At the time of the article’s publication, he was an information specialist for a LGBTQ organization. He currently works as a program manager for an information technology consultant.

**Scholarly/Refereed Status:** Cataloging & Classification Quarterly is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to Urlich’s Global Serials Directory and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

**Search Strategy:** I searched the LISTA thesaurus for “subject headings, Library of Congress” then ANDed it with author-supplied keywords from LISTA’s index for terms and phrases
starting with the term “future.” The search was further limited by published years of 2000-2012 and by scholarly articles.

**Database:** Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

**Search method:** Controlled vocabulary search and keyword search

**Search string:**
DE "SUBJECT headings, Library of Congress" AND ((ZW "future") or (ZW "future bibliographic control") or (ZW "future of cataloging") or (ZW "future predictions") or (ZW "future prospect") or (ZW "future trends"))

**Limiters** - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Publication Date: 19900101-20121231

**Entry 3:**

**Abstract:** “Critical race theory is introduced as a potentially useful approach to the evaluation of bibliographic classification schemes. An overview is presented of the essential elements of critical race theory, including clarifications of the meanings of some important terms such as ‘race’ and ‘social justice.’ On the basis of a review of existing conceptions of the just and the antiracist library service, a rationale is presented for hypothesizing that critical race theory may be of use to the library and information sciences. The role of classification schemes as information institutions in their own right is established, and the Dewey Decimal Classification is introduced as the case to be studied. The challenges faced by classification-scheme designers in the construction and reconstruction of race-related categories are reviewed; and an analysis is presented of one sense in which it might be suggested that recent (2003) revisions in one of the DDC’s tables appear not to meet those challenges wholly successfully. An account is given of a further sense in which adoption of a critical race-theoretic approach has the more radical effect of calling into question a fundamental decision recently taken to ‘deracialize’ the DDC. In conclusion, an assessment is made of critical race theory as a framework for evaluating library classification schemes.”

**Annotation:** In this thorough but dense and repetitive article, Furner puts forth a compelling argument against the DDC’s attempt to address criticisms of racial bias by eliminating references to race. Those who prescribe to liberal race theory contend that racism can be eradicated simply by removing racial categories from society. The article contends that the absence of a physical definition of race does not remove the space that race occupies in social discourse and identification, and therefore this practice, to which apparently the DDC adheres, has the effect of restricting access to library materials about race and/or to racially self-defined users who seek such materials.

**Authority:** The author of many published articles in the library and information sciences, Furner is an associate professor in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.
Scholarly/Refereed Status: The official journal of the International Society for Knowledge Organization, *Knowledge Organization* is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to *Urlich’s Global Serials Directory*. According to its website, the journal’s scope encompasses theoretical and practical discussions and research relating to classification systems and information access.

Search strategy: I consulted the Library Science research guide on the Hagerty Library’s website and found the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. I found the entry for “Social Influences on Classification” in which Furner was cited. I then conducted an author phrase search in ArticleFirst.

Database: OCLC ArticleFirst

Search method: Browsing, Footnote chasing, and author search

Search string:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search in database:</th>
<th>OCLC index of articles from the contents pages of journals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search for:</td>
<td>ferner jonathan Author Phrase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entry 4:


Abstract: “This article evaluates representation of transgender people and experiences in *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)*. It compares *LCSH* treatment of transgender topics to that of controlled vocabularies developed to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) collections, as well as their treatment by scholarly LGBT encyclopedias. The appraisal of these knowledge domains demonstrates the continued relevance of subject descriptors as a mode of knowledge production both for information professionals and for those we serve. It also suggests strategies available to librarians to render transgender people more visible and accessible in library catalogs, including incorporating new technologies as well as modifying established cataloging instruments.”

Annotation: The author shows that since *LCSH* has been inadequately receptive to the changes requested by the LGBT community, it has created its own indexed vocabularies. To demonstrate *LCSH*’s slow and inappropriate revisions, and taking off from the term “transgender,” the article then compares the treatment of eight oft-misinterpreted LGBT-related terms within the two LGBT-created thesauri, an Ebsco-hosted LGBT full text article database, and *LCSH*. In light of the financial deterrents for local libraries to create and maintain their own distinct thesauri, especially considering the shape-shifting nature of self-reference both inside and out of the LGBT community, the author suggests that other shared bibliographic utilities such as OCLC and semantic and social tagging are ways of improving access to LGBT and transgender literature without relying on *LCSH*.
Authority: At the time of article’s publication, Johnson was employed by EMC Corporation, an international information technology services provider, and currently works in their Taxonomy and Information Standards division. He is also the author of an essay, “A hidden history of queer subject access,” published in Radical cataloging: Essays at the front (Roberto, 2008).

Scholarly/Refereed Status: Cataloging & Classification Quarterly is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to Urlich’s Global Serials Directory and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

Search Strategy: I searched the LISTA thesaurus for “subject headings, Library of Congress” then ANDed it with author-supplied keywords from LISTA’s index for terms and phrases starting with the term “future.” The search was further limited by published years of 2000-2012 and by scholarly articles.

Database: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

Search method: Controlled vocabulary search and keyword search

Search string:
DE "SUBJECT headings, Library of Congress" AND ((ZW "future") or (ZW "future bibliographic control") or (ZW "future of cataloging") or (ZW "future predictions") or (ZW "future prospect") or (ZW "future trends"))

Limiter - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Publication Date: 19900101-20121231

Entry 5:

Abstract: “The article looks at the inadequacies of the Library of Congress (LC) classification system in describing materials on Native American in the U.S. and First Nations in Canada. According to library student Holly Tomren of San Jose State University in California, Native American materials in LC E class fall into three broad subclasses, which are geography, topic and tribes and cultures. To address such issue, the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) has proposed to review various subjects headings used for works on Aboriginal peoples.”

Annotation: The article draws upon scholarship on language bias toward Native American and Aboriginal culture to argue that the LCC and the LCSH reflect a Eurocentric world view and thus inadequately describe and classify the literature by and about these peoples. To make the point, the author discusses some differences between the cultural perspectives and linguistic structures of Aboriginals to those of the contributors of the LCSH. Further, the author uses the term “Indian” to show how the LCSH uses a too-broad and colonialist term to describe hundreds of diverse bands and tribes in North America. The author discusses efforts by the Library of Congress and its Canadian counterpart, Library and Archives Canada, to address these issues. The author also describes efforts by some libraries to create an alternative classification system.
**Authority:** The author of three articles on art librarianship, Kam is a Fine Arts Librarian at the University of British Columbia.

**Scholarly/Refereed Status:** *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to *Urlich’s Global Serials Directory* and the journal’s website, which states that its scope is “art and architecture librarianship, digital image management, technology related to the visual arts, art publishing, artists’ books, and related fields.” Published by the University of Chicago Press, it is the official journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLISNA).

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database in Dialog in order to access its subject index for “Library of Congress Subject Headings” and its additional index field of “py,” and to rank, select, and sort journals known to be scholarly and peer-reviewed.

**Database:** Dialog File 438: Library Lit. & Info. Science, the HW Wilson Co.

**Search method:** Controlled vocabulary search

**Search string:**
Library of Congress Subject Headings/de AND py>=2000
rank s1 jn cont
66 [unique records]
[saved]1,6,8,11,15,17,19,21,39,41,48-49,51-56
exs
s1 and s2:s19
Sort s21/all/jn
t s22/9/all

**Entry 6:**

**Abstract:** “The Library of Congress Subject Headings have been criticized for containing biased subject headings. One leading critic has been Sanford Berman, whose 1971 monograph *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People (P&A)* listed a number of objectionable headings and proposed remedies. In the decades since *P&A* was first published, many of Berman’s suggestions have been implemented, while other headings remain unchanged. This paper compiles all of Berman’s suggestions and tracks the changes that have occurred; a brief analysis of the remaining areas of bias is included.”

**Annotation:** Berman and others have criticized *LCSH* for bias especially its descriptions of groups of non-American, non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, and non-Christian peoples. Referencing the changes to *LCSH* that Berman (1971) suggested, the article provides helpful summaries of and comparisons between the two sources. The results of Knowlton’s analysis
show that nearly two-thirds of the recommendations have been implemented fully or partially. The author contends that the remaining one-third unaltered headings correspond to Berman’s structural suggestions as well as those that would distinguish some religious and historical terms away from the unspecified assumptions of Christian and United States.

**Authority:** The author of six library-related articles and book reviews as indexed in LISTA, Knowlton has most recently worked as the Collection Development Librarian at the University of Memphis.

**Scholarly/Refereed Status:** *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to *Urlich’s Global Serials Directory* and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

**Search Strategy:** I searched the LISTA thesaurus for “subject headings, Library of Congress” then ANDed it with author-supplied keywords from LISTA’s index for terms and phrases starting with the term “future.” The search was further limited by published years of 2000-2012 and by scholarly articles.

**Database:** Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

**Search method:** Controlled vocabulary search and keyword search

**Search string:**
DE "SUBJECT headings, Library of Congress" AND ((ZW "future bibliographic control") or (ZW "future of cataloging") or (ZW "future predictions") or (ZW "future prospect") or (ZW "future trends"))

Limiters - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Publication Date: 19900101-20121231

**Entry 7:**

**Abstract:** “A classification scheme reinforces the social systems that were in place at the time the system was devised, and projects, no matter how subtly or ineffectively, the social, moral and intellectual values of that system. The *Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)* scheme is the most widely used library classification scheme in the world today; it is based on the shape of the 19th century North American academic world, and shows a distinct bias no longer acceptable for libraries of the 21st century. Non-Western languages and literatures are given short shrift in classes 400 and 800 of the *DDC*. The situation of African languages and literatures is a case in point. Attempts at official and local revisions have been made, but more systemic efforts are necessary. The problem is complex and there are no easy answers. Nevertheless, national libraries should step forward to address the issue, and the new models for adapting the *DDC* should be investigated.”
Annotation: The article addresses Western and Eurocentric bias in the structure of the DDC through the lens of its classification of Languages and Literature, and as applied to those of Africa. The author criticizes the DDC for subdividing Literature by languages first, noting that literatures from multilingual countries would be classed and shelved non-adjacently. She further rebukes the DDC for the top-heavy assignment of Western languages and Western literatures which leaves scant numeration for “other languages” and “other literatures,” an unreasonable practice considering the DDC’s global reach and the many non-Western cultures and nations now utilizing it. The author thoughtfully considers the practicality of alternatives and adaptations proposed by others. Although she recognizes the value and ubiquity of the DDC, and therefore its relative immutability, she calls on the worldwide library community to advocate changes as to be apace with the global bibliographic needs of the 21st century.

Authority: A library student at the University of Michigan when this article was published, Kua is now managing a literacy program in the Darfur region. This article received an honorable mention in the Libri Best Student Award Competition, and before that Kua won the top undergraduate prize for her honor’s thesis.

Scholarly/Refereed Status: Libri is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to Urlich’s Global Serials Directory and the journal’s website. Libri subjects student articles to the same rigorous criteria as regular submissions. The journal covers all aspects of library and information studies and emphasizes an international focus.


Database: Dialog File 7: Social SciSearch, the Thomson Corp.

Search method: Citation search

Search string:
e cr=mowery rl,
s e4:e10,e12:e17
s s1 and py>=2000
 t s2/9/all


Abstract: “Discusses the adoption of Library of Congress Subject Headings and Library of Congress Classification by libraries in Canada and various Latin American countries. Reliance of other countries on U.S. bibliographic schema, methods and terminology of accessing library information; Overview of the 1971 publication entitled Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People, by Sanford Berman; Examination of several issues to ascertain the degree of bias manifested in the bibliographic control system.”
Annotation: This article discusses the ways the usage of LCSH and LCC in the national libraries of Mexico, Canada, and El Salvador has influenced both access to and interpretation of their collections. The author shows if and how each of the three systems has adapted LCSH and LCC to meet their own needs. In order to show the predominant American perspective of LC, the author compares the subject headings and classification assigned by the libraries to literature about shared histories between the United States and each of the other three countries, namely three distinct military conflicts. Considering the prohibitive costs to libraries of retrospective cataloging and of being informationally isolated from the rest of the world, the author admonishes librarians and researchers to be cognizant of potential cultural and national bias. The article’s strength lies in its methodology, despite that the results alone do not seem to support the premise that LCSH and LCC represent American hegemony.

Authority: At the time of the article’s publication, McKennon was an assistant librarian at Arizona State University.

Scholarly/Refereed Status: Published by the Duke University Press, Radical History Review is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to Urlich’s Global Serials Directory. According to the journal’s website, its focus is analysis and criticism of social and political history. Although the article was not published in a Library and Information Studies journal, the topic of the article and this bibliography fall within the purview of the socio-political history of American libraries.

Search Strategy: I searched the LISTA thesaurus for “subject headings, Library of Congress” then ANDed it with author-supplied keywords from LISTA’s index for terms and phrases starting with the term “future.” The search was further limited by published years of 2000-2012 and by scholarly articles.

Database: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

Search method: Controlled vocabulary search and keyword search

Search string:
DE "SUBJECT headings, Library of Congress" AND ((ZW "future") or (ZW "future bibliographic control") or (ZW "future of cataloging") or (ZW "future predictions") or (ZW "future prospect") or (ZW "future trends"))
Limiter - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Publication Date: 19900101-20121231

Entry 9:

Abstract: “In this paper we argue that the broader definition of classification offered by sociologists and by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star addresses pertinent knowledge
Carole J. Griffin

organization processes that we can use to investigate the moral, scientific, and aesthetic implications of different kinds of knowledge organization systems. We do so by systematically investigating the organization of the violence against women research literature by medical, allied health, and social sciences bibliographic databases in particular by the National Library of Medicine’s Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). Our findings indicate that underlying these knowledge organization systems are certain discourses on violence against women that may reinforce a gender-neutral understanding of violence.”

**Annotation:** In this expository analysis, the authors call for changes to MeSH regarding the research literature on Domestic Violence, in order to improve access to consumers and researchers alike. The article contends that since this topic is approached from multiple disciplines, both inside and out of biomedicine, a shared vocabulary is needed, one that keeps pace with the research, as a means to accelerating the development of preventative and applicable remedies. The article makes a good case for exploring the limits of knowledge organization systems especially in light of the trend toward multidisciplinary scholarship, particularly in Women’s Studies. However, it proposes in its abstract to also “investigate the moral, scientific, and aesthetic implications” of MeSH’s treatment of Domestic Violence. Unfortunately, the language of the article does not seem to portray that level of criticism, and if it does, it may have been lost in the depth of the detailed background information given.

**Authority:** At the time of the article’s publication, Neal and Wathen were professors at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario at which McTavish was a PhD student. McTavish was also a medical librarian.

**Scholarly/Refereed Status:** The official journal of the International Society for Knowledge Organization, Knowledge Organization is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to Ulrich’s Global Serials Directory. According to its website, the journal’s scope encompasses theoretical and practical discussions and research relating to classification systems and information access.

**Search strategy:** A citation search in Web of Science for Bella Hass Weinberg (editor of Cataloging Heresy, 1991) retrieved an article by Hope A. Olson that was cited by McTavish, Neal and Wathen.

**Database:** Web of Science

**Search method:** Citation search

**Search string:**

| Cited Author=(weinberg b*) AND Cited Year=(1990-1993) AND Language=(English) |
|---|---|---|
| Title: How we construct subjects: A feminist analysis | Author(s): Olson Hope A. |
Entry 10:

Abstract: “The Library of Congress Subject Headings have traditionally attempted to reflect reality neutrally. The result is bias in representing cultural margins. While neutrality is one of the ethical stances espoused by librarianship, another is universal and equitable access to information for the betterment of humanity. This paper views LCSH as a potential tool for cultural change using Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of a Third Space as a model. LCSH functions as a Third Space where the meanings of documents are constructed and enunciated for library users. Therefore, it is in LCSH that there is potential for instigating change.”

Annotation: This article lays the foundation and justification for analysis of subject headings and classification schemes of all the types represented in this bibliography. Olson argues that such criticism and the changes she prescribes concur with a commitment to ethical librarianship. The article provides a comprehensive definition of subject headings, more than simply access points in a bibliographic record, they’re also a grouping mechanism and a contextual model for meaning and interpretation. It also explains how LCSH fails in its attempt to be neutral, unambivalent, and universal because the world it represents is not, and that this goal masks the “exclusions, marginalizations, and distortions” (p.59) it contains. Olson proposes that the Library of Congress alter its subject heading creation methodology in order to incorporate ambivalence rather than dichotomy and hierarchy because, according to postcolonial theory, acknowledging and revealing cultural diversity inspires cultural change.

Authority: An author of many scholarly articles and books in the field of classification and subject access bias, Olson is currently a professor at the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and serves on the editorial board of the journal Knowledge Organization.

Scholarly/Refereed Status: Cataloging & Classification Quarterly is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to Ulrich’s Global Serials Directory and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

Search strategy: I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database in Dialog in order to access its subject index for “Library of Congress Subject Headings” and its additional index field of “py,” and to rank, select, and sort journals known to be scholarly and peer-reviewed.


Search method: Controlled vocabulary search

Search string:
Library of Congress Subject Headings/de AND py>=2000
rank s1 jn cont
Entry 11:

**Abstract:** “Critiques of subject access standards in LIS literature have addressed biases of gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, language and religion as limits to the representation of diversity and to effective library service for diverse populations. The current study identifies and analyzes this literature as a basis for ameliorating systemic bias and to gather the existing literature for wider accessibility. The study analyzes five quantitative variables: standards discussed, categories of problems, marginalized groups and topics discussed, date, and basis of conclusions (research or experience). Textual analysis reveals that basic tenets of subject access–user-focused cataloguing, objectivity, and standardization–are problematized in the literature and may be the best starting point for future research. In practice, librarians can work to counteract systemic problems in the careful and equitable application of standards and their adaptation to local contexts.”

**Annotation:** This textual analysis provides the most recent discussion of the specific types of bias in subject access systems, the marginalized groups and topics affected, and the systems in which they are concentrated. Of particular interest is the discussion about the chronological breakdown of both the topics critiqued and the quantity of critiques. Of note also is the criticism of “user-focused cataloging” (p.75) which, according to Olson and Schlegl, tends to signify mainstream (read white, male, and Christian) users. Investigating the three decades prior to 2000, the article establishes a valuable foundation from which to trace prior criticisms as they intersect with changes that may have been made.

**Authority:** An author of many scholarly articles and books in the field of classification and subject access bias, Olson is currently a professor at the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and serves on the editorial board of the journal *Knowledge Organization*.

**Scholarly/Refereed Status:** *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to *Urlich’s Global Serials Directory* and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

**Search strategy:** I searched OCLC’s ECO database on the Identifier Phrase “subject headings” (after browsing the index) and limited the results within the date range 2000-2012.

**Database:** OCLC Electronic Collections Online (ECO)
**Search method:** Controlled vocabulary search

**Search String:**

![Search interface screenshot](image)

**Entry 12:**

**Abstract:** “This article explains the concept of world view and shows how the world view of cataloguers influences the development and assignment of subject headings to works about other cultures and civilizations, using works from Classical literature and Ancient history as examples. Cataloguers are encouraged to evaluate the headings they assign to works in Classical literature and Ancient history in terms of the world views of Ancient Greece and Rome so that headings reflect the contents of the works they describe and give fuller expression to the diversity of thoughts and themes that characterize these ancient civilizations.”

**Annotation:** Drawing on contemporary and ancient literature from and about 4th century Greece and Library of Congress literature, the article argues that the *LCSH*’s treatment of Ancient Greece’s geography, culture, literature, and fields of study reflects Eurocentric values and beliefs, and disregards the differences in cultural perspective. As an example, the author shows how *LCSH*’s usage of the term “rhetoric” does not consider the evolution of and thus the difference in meaning of the term across the span of a millennium. The author calls upon catalogers to be conscious of the contrast in perspectives and evaluate the literature on its own terms. The article would carry more weight if the author had cited scholarship from the fields of library science and postcolonial criticism, but on its own merits, the arguments appear sound.

**Authority:** At the times of the article’s writing, Poll was a Cataloguer at the University of South Africa Library.

**Scholarly/Refereed Status:** *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to *Urlich’s Global Serials Directory* and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database in Dialog using keywords for variations of the phrase “Library of Congress Subject Headings” and synonymous terms relating to “problems” and “future.” Additionally, I limited the search by “published year” and ranked and selected scholarly journals from the top ten listed. This was my first search in the Library Literature and Information Science database in Dialog.

Search method: Keyword searching

Search string:
subject headings or library of congress subject headings or
(library(2w)congress(5n)subject(5n)heading?) and
(future or limitation? or problem? or shortcoming? or obstacle? or concern?)
s1 and py>=2000
rank s2 jn cont
10
[saved] 2,6,8
exs
s2 and s2:s5
sort s7/all/jn
t 8/9/all

Entry 13:

Abstract: “In traditional library cataloging models, hierarchical taxonomic and classification structures are used to describe pieces of information. These schemas are lacking in any sort of mechanism to acknowledge people’s sometimes amorphous and often fluid identities. This paper will specifically address Library of Congress–based cataloging practices, including classification, and their role in enforcing normative boundaries for queer sexualities and gender. Through the use of inaccurate language in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)* and problematic classification schemes, catalogers often unwittingly contribute to the creation of library environments that are passively hostile to transgender users.”

Annotation: The article passionately discusses the ways in which the *LCSH*, the *LCC*, and the *DDC* obscure or marginalize people who identify as queer, gay, lesbian, and transgender, and who practice gendered cross-dressing and impersonating. The author criticizes the *LCSH* for inaccurately subclassing “transgender” under the rubric of “sexual minorities,” and likewise “cross-dressing” and “impersonating” under “transgender,” inaccurate since “transgender” and its subclassed terms are not LGBTQ-defined by sexuality. The author recognizes the difficulty involved in needing to essentially force a library material into a singular place, but he worries that the discrepancy between a book’s content and its assigned category creates an unwelcoming and inaccessible space for LGBTQ literature and information seekers alike. Without suggesting concrete alternatives, he seems to believe that a new progressive way of classifying is possible.

Authority: At the time of this article’s publication, Roberto was the serials and electronic resources librarian at the University of Denver and an adjunct cataloging instructor for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In addition to this article, he has recently coauthored an article published in *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* and is the editor of the book, *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front* (2008).
**Scholarly/Refereed Status:** *Journal of Information Ethics* is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to *Ulrich’s Global Serials Directory* and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on ethical issues pertaining to all areas of information technology and library science.

**Search strategy:** I ran a citation search on the name of an often cited author in this topic, Sandy Berman, and the publication year of his 1971 book, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*, in order to find recent research.

**Database:** Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

**Search method:** Citation search

**Search string:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cited Author:</th>
<th>Cited Title:</th>
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**Entry 14:**


**Abstract:** “The *Library of Congress Subject Headings* has flaws in the logic and structure of its headings relating to the Southwest. Examples demonstrate aspects of the regional biases that make it frustrating to use *LCSH* for cataloging Southwest collections. The frustrations experienced by students, researchers, and library patrons trying to find detailed information on the Southwest have significant social consequences, especially for Hispanics and Native Americans. Antonio Gramsci’s concepts provide a framework to present the implications of these consequences and the need to correct them. *LCSH* is a major cataloging and research resource both nationally and internationally. Successfully changing biased and inaccurate *LCSH* subject headings will exhibit social and political leadership while *LCSH* is providing technological leadership as a key source for developing cooperative online international authority files for subject headings.”

**Annotation:** The article exhaustively lists the multiple omissions and generalizations of Southwestern—specifically New Mexico-related terms in *LCSH*. The author validly points out the social and cultural impact of these errors, especially those that pertain to New Mexico’s rich pre-colonial and Spanish colonial history. However, this vast catalog of oversights invites its own criticism, namely about literary warrant for which the author provides scant evidence, an argument made in a subsequent letter to the editor in *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*. I sampled of few of the titles and subject headings Strottman refers to in WorldCat and in the Library of Congress Authorities/Subject Headings online catalog, and found changes since the 29th edition of LCSH that might satisfy her.

**Authority:** At the time of the article’s publication, Strottman was the Technical Services Manager of the J. Cloyd Miller Library, Western New Mexico University.
Scholarly/Refereed Status: *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* is a scholarly and peer-reviewed journal according to *Urluch’s Global Serials Directory* and the journal’s website. The journal focuses on research and review on all aspects of cataloging, classification, and bibliographic control.

Search strategy: I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database in Dialog in order to access its subject index for “Library of Congress Subject Headings” and its additional index field of “py,” and to rank, select, and sort journals known to be scholarly and peer-reviewed.


Search method: Controlled vocabulary search

Search string:
Library of Congress Subject Headings/de AND py>=2000
rank s1 jn cont
66 [unique records]
[saved]1,6,8,11,15,17,19,21,39,41,48-49,51-56
exs
s1 and s2:s19
Sort s21/all/jn
t s22/9/all

Personal Statement

Before I began this project, I had no preconceived notions about the information available. My own frame of reference was an extremely peripheral perspective about the numbingly slow process of making changes to *LCSH* or any bureaucratic library institution what with the plethora of committees and interest groups. It hadn’t occurred to me that criticism of a different nature existed until a classmate mentioned hegemony in relation to controlled vocabulary and the Dewey Decimal system. My interest piqued, I jumped to the conclusion of *LCSH*’s imminent demise before actually examining the facts. Chagrined by my rush to judgment, I was later gratified to discover that others have had similar misgivings. Considering my educational background in critical theories of literature, especially genre and canonical
criticism, I should not have been surprised to find that LCSH, LCC, DDC, and MeSH have been targeted as well.

As I mentioned earlier, recent research pales in comparison to that of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. I am disappointed to have arrived at this discussion late, but what was more disappointing was the difficulty of finding the information in the first place. Were it not for citation searching after my discovery of Berman and Olson, I would’ve had to refocus my research elsewhere. Mirroring the topic at hand, there are no subject headings in LCSH, LISTA, ERIC, etc. for “subject headings, criticism.” My only other preliminary route was to combine “Library of Congress Subject Headings” with keywords in the hopes of discovering a common vocabulary. What I found instead was that the terms used were all over the map, and my subsequent searches, other than those by author, would involve mostly a whittling down process.

I hope that future scholars heed the call for continuing research. I look forward to following and perhaps even contributing to this evolving line of study.

By typing my name below, I certify that: This assignment is entirely my own work. I have not quoted the words of any other person from a printed source or a website without indicating what has been quoted and providing an appropriate citation. I have not submitted this assignment to satisfy the requirements of any other course. Carole J. Griffin October 7, 2012