Module 11 Discussion Questions

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1 Describe ethical concerns that occur in cataloging work.

In their exploration of what ethical cataloging is, Snow and Shoemaker (2020) note Intner's framing of cataloging ethics "largely in terms of of institutional responsibilities: the library's ability or inability to meet its users' needs" (Snow & Shoemaker, 2020, p. 535). In other words, ethical cataloging is about how the library catalog affects the people who use it.

Ethical concerns in cataloging work center on the authorized terms used in controlled vocabularies that are applied to resources in the collections of libraries, archives, and other information organizations. In particular, these ethical concerns arise around terms used to describe human identity. Specific examples include terms applied to gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and identity, race, ethnicity, and immigration status.

Two of this week's resources provide concrete examples of the ethical concerns mentioned above. Billey, Drabinski, and Roberto (2014) apply queer theory to the concept of gender in the catalog in their critique of RDA 9.7. The film *Change the Subject* details the experiences of undocumented students at Dartmouth College after encountering the formerly authorized Library of Congress Subject Heading "illegal aliens" and their efforts to change the heading. Responses to later questions will discuss these ethical concerns in more detail.

2   How can information found in name and subject authority records be offensive to people?

One of the main ways information found in authority records can be offensive to people is through misrepresentation. "Misrepresentation," according to Smiraglia (2009), "or biased representation, occurs when a resource is described in terms that are not consistent with the uses it might engender in a particular milieu" (Smiraglia, 2009, p. 675). *Change the Subject* provides a powerful, concrete example of this.

Melissa Padilla, a Dartmouth undergraduate at the time, encountered the authorized Library of Congress Subject Heading "illegal aliens" while seeking help from Jill Baron, a Dartmouth librarian, in developing an independent study (Broadley et al., 2019). Padilla's reaction is striking:

> My gut reaction to seeing the subject heading, here at Dartmouth, was disgust, and also like perplexed, I was like why? Like, I thought this place would know better or do better. Wow, I can't believe you think these things. I know that there's undocumented students here on campus and you recruit them, and you still subject them to this sort of thing, and it's not okay (Broadley et al., 2019, 5:06).

Through this experience Padilla and other members of CoFIRED, the Dartmouth Coalition for Immigration, Reform, Equality and DREAMers learned that the offensive term wasn't only in use at Dartmouth, but was in fact part of a national standard (Broadley et al., 2019, 6:29, 21:58). In other words, this was problematic at a national level, and more people than just Dartmouth undergraduates were being affected.

3   How can content standards (e.g., RDA, AACR2) in cataloging be ethically problematic for users of the catalog?

Billey, Drabinkski, and Roberto (2014) argue against the notion that the gender marker in RDA 9.7 is "and objective description of reality" and is in fact "passively harmful to transgender individuals" (Billey et al., 2014, p. 414). RDA, in their analysis, does this by denying the existence of genders that fall outside the male-female binary. In other words, library users who identify outside the gender binary will not see themselves reflected in the catalog.

The same authors note that catalogers, in the quest to provide complete records, have the leeway "to codify erroneous information" (Billey et al., 2014, p. 418). They give the example of New Orleans bounce artist Big Freedia, who, according to a 2011 interview, "fluidly use[s] masculine and feminine pronouns" but identifies as a gay man (Billey et al., 2014, p. 418). But the cataloger who created the authority record for Big Freedia made an erroneous assumption about the artist's gender: "The authority record for the gender-bending hip-hop artist, Big Freedia records his gender as 'female' (Billey et al., 2014, p. 418).

Returning to the discussion of the offensive former LCSH term for undocumented immigrants, in the film *Change the Subject*, Dartmouth librarian Jill Baron notes how neutrality can in fact be harmful: "I didn't look at the system, the cataloging system as actually an expression of values. I just sort of saw it as this disassociated, neutral, organizing principle" (Broadley et al., 2019, 9:59). In the same film, Dr. Claudia Anguiano Evans-Zepeda, a former faculty advisor to the Dartmouth student group CoFIRED, succinctly states exactly why the former subject heading is so offensive: "It's wielded most specifically towards migrants of color and there's a racist coding to it and by virtue of its power it becomes part of the ways in which anti-immigrant sentiment festers" (Broadley et al., 2019, 11:29).

4 Given that cataloging systems are biased, how then do we organize and describe information ethically?

To organize and describe information ethically, we begin by recognizing that just as the perfect metadata record does not exist, the perfectly ethical metadata record does not exist either. Cataloging is never complete; it is an ongoing process, and attention to changing cultural norms is a part of this process.

One specific way to organize and describe information ethically is to question standards, which Snow and Shoemaker (2020) define as "not strictly following standards such as RDA, LCSH, but modifying them at the local level or attempting to change the standard to better serve users and/or be more respectful of others; recognizing that standards are biased" (Snow & Shoemaker, 2020, p. 538).

The same authors argue for working from shared values in the filed of cataloging; they enumerate

five such values synthesized from responses to a questionnaire they shared with catalogers:

- Accessibility of resources and metadata

- Awareness of personal, institutional, and standards bias

- Inclusive metadata and actions

- Accurate representation of resources and agents

- Adhering to standards while interrogating their usefulness (Snow & Shoemaker, 2020, p. 543)

Most important, though, is to listen to feedback shared by library patrons, stakeholders, and other constituents, especially those from marginalized communities, in the ongoing effort to prevent the library catalog from causing harm

5   References

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