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Share and Tell

Wetli, A. (2020). Addressing cultural insensitivity in archival description: A literature review examining collaborative approaches. *Journal of New Librarianship*, *4*(2), 505-515. <https://doi.org/10.21173/newlibs/8/3>

Wetli surveys a range of publications that turn a critical eye on traditional, standardized controlled vocabularies for resource description such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), Dublin Core, and the Society of American Archivists’ Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) and the ways in which these controlled vocabularies can harm marginalized communities described by these tools, especially in the archive. For example, “LCSH uses ‘transsexual’ or ‘transgender people’ to describe non-gender conforming individuals” although “these communities often describe themselves with terms like ‘trans\*,’ ‘gender queer,’ or ‘gender fluid,’ and view the term ‘transsexual’ as offensive” (507). Or, although “the term ‘internment’ is frequently used to describe collections that document the forced imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II…the Japanese American community more widely prefers the use of the term ‘incarceration’ to…acknowledge the trauma” inflicted upon them (507). Perhaps most strikingly of the examples given by Wetli, “[a] collaborative project between Zuni tribal members and the A:shiwi A:wan Museum of Zuni heritage found that 83% of the items described in the museum’s collections held incorrect information” (507).

Wetli goes on to examine ways “community archiving practices” have "helped to address some issues of misrepresentation in the archive,” especially the “community stewardship model.” (508). “Folksonomies” (a play on the term “taxonomy”), described as “crowdsourced and organic assemblages of terminology” are presented as one approach to incorporate communities into the work of resource description, as is working directly with collection donors to describe donated items (509).

Wetli concludes by stating that “[c]entering the community needs to be key in archiving marginalized histories,” both advocating for using “flexible [description] practices…in conjunction with standardization” and calling for further research into user-generated metadata in the archive (512).

The article’s main strength is the range of communities and collections the author examined for the piece. Through personal correspondence with individuals involved in resource description work at institutions such as the Austin History Center, home of Latinx, African American, and Asian American Community Archives, and the Chicana por mi Raza oral history digital archive, Wetli gives concrete examples of archives and archivists who, to use the author’s phrase, are centering community needs in their collection and description work (509-510). The Austin History Center uses LCSH in addition to “their own internal controlled vocabulary” while Chicana por mi Raza “eschews use of LCSH altogether, due to particularly outdated and offensive terminology used for Latinx communities,” instead using a “particularly strong model of collaboration that involves the community and subject experts at multiple points across the archival process” to generate metadata for resource description (510).

Language, with all its beauties and imperfections, is the primary tool we have for describing our collections, and Wetli makes important points about language as it is used for resource description, noting that “[a] neutral, unbiased archive is not possible and with this, it is impossible not to include politicized language in archival description” (506). In particular, “[human] language is continually evolving, making it impossible for the [Library of Congress] to keep up-to-date with the changing vernacular of our world’s diverse populations” (506). I would have liked to see this article explore how collections are using languages other than or in addition to English for resource description, especially since the author references collections housing materials about multi-lingual populations. Wetli acknowledges that the community practices described in this article are “most evident in smaller, subject-specific, grassroots archives” but calls for larger, less agile institutions to take up similar practices (506). I am hopeful that researchers and practitioners in such institutions will heed this call and share their findings with the community.

I could easily see this article being assigned for discussion in this class under either the Diversity and Social Responsibility topic or the Preservation and Cultural Heritage topic. For me, it served as a reminder that the core values of librarianship must be upheld in every area of the profession. When it comes to programming or collection development, I think it is easier to envision how libraries and librarians can engage with societal discourse around important social issues such as Black Lives Matter and LGBT rights than it is to see how metadata work can engage. This article, though, exhibits concrete and direct ways those tasked with describing resources in their care can uphold the core value of diversity.

The cost of not using inclusive language in resource descriptions or community-based archiving practices is clear: to paraphrase Wetli, it renders marginalized populations invisible in the archives (507), and that goes against what we stand for as librarians in service to our communities. Anyone seeking information about their community not only has the right to access that information, but also to seek it with inclusive, familiar, and affirming language. I look forward to following further research in this area.