**Ethical authority control practice**

In addition to staying informed about technological changes and the opportunities they present, catalogers must also remain aware of ethical issues associated with authority control. Catalogers are increasingly cognizant of the significant power they have in the creation of personal name authority records, as they determine how a creator will be described in the authority record. While differentiation is an important aspect of authority work, careful consideration must be employed in determining which of several possible forms of a name should be used as the authorized access point by which an individual will be known within the database and in selecting the key descriptors to include in authority records. Two main areas of authority work that are impacted by ethical concerns center around the creation of name authorities and the use and selection of subjects.

Many ethical issues faced by catalogers in creating, maintaining, and using name authority records surround the issues of privacy and safety. Consider, for example, the ethical issues that may come into play when doing name authority work for the creator of a zine, which is a low-distribution, self-published booklet generally used to convey personal experiences, information, or interests. Because zines may contain sensitive or very personal information, some zine creators do not want their identity known, or they may only use a partial name or a pseudonym. While the cataloger may feel the responsibility to do further research about a particular zine creator in order to connect all resources they have authored, being aware of the environments in which zines are created and distributed necessitates caution. The Zine Librarians Code of Ethics includes guidelines for identifying and creating authority records for zine creators which emphasize respecting their privacy and not exposing legal identities of zine creators when not explicitly found in the zines themselves.[[1]](#endnote-1) Name authority work also requires consideration of the safety of the subject of the name authority record when recording characteristics of the individual authors themselves. For example, the option to include gender terms in authority records has raised concerns from the library community about outing transgender and gender diverse individuals. While the Program for Cooperative Cataloging Ad Hoc Task Group on Gender in Name Authority Records published a report in 2016 to suggest best practices for recording gender, the discussion is still ongoing, with the issues of self-determination and consent at its core.[[2]](#endnote-2) These and many other issues require the intentional and thoughtful practice of ethical name authority work.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Ethical concerns also come into play when catalogers are assigning subject terms, especially with relation to bias within subject lists. Subject authority records identify the preferred access point for the topical coverage of the information resource being described. The LCSH is a controlled vocabulary for subject description, based on Library of Congress (LC)’s subject authority records. As the source of subject terms most widely used in American libraries, the LCSH is nevertheless known to contain biases that categorize library resources from an American and Western perspective, assuming that patrons searching the catalog will more likely be male, Christian, white, and heterosexual.[[4]](#endnote-4) One example of a biased term in the LCSH is the problematic phrase “illegal aliens,” which is used to describe undocumented immigrants. The use of this pejorative in Dartmouth College’s library catalog spurred students and librarians in 2014 to formally request that LC change the subject heading. After an initial rejection of the proposal, LC ultimately affirmed that they would remove “illegal aliens” from the controlled vocabulary and replace it with two new terms “noncitizens” and “unauthorized immigration.” This announcement, however, spurred opposition within Congress. The activism surrounding the bias in this subject access point is documented in a film titled *Change the Subject*.[[5]](#endnote-5) While LC has still not made the change within LCSH, many libraries are opting to employ more ethical practice in their cataloging through implementing the use of alternate language such as “undocumented immigrants” or “noncitizens” within their local databases.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Bias in subject headings may sometimes be mitigated through the use of decentralized vocabularies. In the case of the development of the First Nations House of Learning (FNHL) Subject Headings, librarians acknowledged the potential harm to library users in applying LCSH subject terms for Indigenous materials, due to the lack of representation of Indigenous diversity and its misrepresentation of some concepts. The FNHL Subject Headings seeks to incorporate accurate Aboriginal names, respecting self-representation of “individuals, collectives, and their concepts.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

As practitioners grapple with these challenging decisions in their authority work, important conversations are emerging in academic literature, conferences, forums, committees, and working groups. To bolster the development of each individual cataloger’s judgment, the library community is working toward the provision of better institutional guidance for the ethical application of cataloging principles. The Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee is a new international committee that is developing a code of ethics for catalogers which will address key issues (see <https://sites.google.com/view/cataloging-ethics/home>). Another resource produced by this committee is a growing cataloging ethics bibliography, providing catalogers a comprehensive curriculum for developing their awareness of the issues at stake and practical solutions for scenarios they may encounter in their work.[[8]](#endnote-8) Keeping abreast of the evolution of ethical authority control practice through a study of the literature, participating in community developments, and applying ethical principles as they are learned will ensure catalogers have the understanding necessary to ethically provide library users with richly connected resources and useful information about the creators of those works.

1. ZineLibraries.info, December 12, 2020, <http://zinelibraries.info/2016/05/30/code-of-ethics-1115-web-version/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kalani Adolpho, “Who Asked You? Consent, Self-Determination, and the Report of the PCC Ad Hoc Task Group on Gender in Name Authority Records,” in *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019), 111-131. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jane Sandberg, editor, *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019). This significant monograph builds on previous ethical discussions in library literature to provide an ethical framework for the library community. Contributing authors explore such issues as self-determination, privacy, the impacts of colonialism, gender variance, transgender identities, the impacts of emerging technologies, and suggestions for how to solve some of the ethical challenges in this work. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Grace Lo, “’Aliens’ vs. Catalogers: Bias in the Library of Congress Subject Heading,” *Legal Reference Services Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2019): 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jill E. Baron, *Change the Subject*, Dartmouth Digital Library Program, 2019, video, 54:00, <https://n2t.net/ark:/83024/d4hq3s42r>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Violet Fox et al., “Report of the SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH ‘Illegal Aliens,’” American Library Association Institutional Repository, June 19, 2020, <http://hdl.handle.net/11213/14582>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ann M. Doyle, Kimberley Dawson, and Sarah Dupont, “Indigenization of Knowledge Organization at the Xwi7xwa Library,” *International Journal of Library and information Studies* 13, no. 2 (2015): 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cataloging Steering Committee website, August 30, 2020, <https://sites.google.com/view/cataloging-ethics/home?authuser=0>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)