

LCSH, Transparency, and the Impact of Collective Action

Demystifying the Subject Heading Approval Process

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ABSTRACT: A narrative reflection on the impact of professional networking and collective action to enact change through the Library of Congress Subject Heading proposal process.

Proposed lists of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are rarely met with great fanfare or outrage. The Policy, Training, and Cooperative Programming (PTCP) Division of the Library of Congress (LOC) publishes tentative lists semi-regularly and publicly as part of the standard process for reviewing proposed additions, cancellations, and changes to the vocabulary. The purpose is to offer an opportunity for community members to provide feedback, support, and/or disagreement about the proposed changes. In late November 2024, Tentative Monthly List 12 (LCSH) was released for review, and for the next several months, would elicit a response from the cataloging, metadata, and general library and archives communities that exemplifies the power and importance of community activism.

For months, the relatively new Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) funnel, Gender and Sexuality, and individual catalogers had been preparing and submitting several new headings to expand and update the coverage of LGBTQ+ topics in LCSH. On this particular list, several of these proposals were presented, including “African American gender-nonconforming people,” “Sexual minority high school students,” and “Gender non-conforming people--United States.” Each of these proposed headings would allow for the described individuals and communities to better access materials related to their lived experiences. In sharp contrast, another proposal, one which would change the existing subject heading “Trans-exclusionary radical feminism” to “Gender-critical feminism,” drew the attention of the community as the latest in a longstanding attempt to replace common use terms for oppressive movements with more euphemistic ones.

Almost immediately after the list’s publication, librarians and archivists began to write. A group of concerned librarians, representing both public and academic libraries, wrote and published an open letter to LOC outlining succinctly why the proposed change did not meet the requirements for a subject proposal. Additionally, they drew attention to the ways in which this proposal, if approved, would violate aspects of the Library Bill of Rights and the ALA Code of Ethics. At the same time, the Gender and Sexuality SACO funnel drafted and circulated an exhaustive statement which expanded on the letter’s position that the proposed change did not meet minimum requirements for a subject proposal. In the ten page statement, the funnel challenged the usage statistics of “Gender-critical feminism” over “Trans-exclusionary radical feminism,” highlighting the inclusion in Merriam-Webster, the frequency of usage in published resources as demonstrated by the Google Books NGram Viewer, the number of results for each in a general Google search, and the usage of “Trans-exclusionary radical feminism” by the group itself. Narrowing the scope, the statement outlines the accuracy and clarity of the term “Trans-exclusionary radical feminism” over “Gender-critical feminism,” as well as the

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structural issues with the proposal itself, including the incorrect use of the 550 field (Broader Term) as opposed to a 450 (Former Heading). The most impactful section of the statement addressed the attempt to justify the change by claiming that “Trans-exclusionary radical feminism” is a slur. In this section, the funnel meticulously dismantled this claim, demonstrating that the argument in and of itself is invalid and problematic in that it is used by an oppressive group to “claim victimhood, and deflect blame for the very real harms perpetuated against trans people that the movement encourages.”

The open letter and the Gender and Sexuality funnel statement laid the foundation for responses by individuals expressing their concerns surrounding the proposal. The links to the open letter and funnel statement were shared broadly, through listservs, Slack channels, Discord groups, and personal networking connections. Individual librarians, archivists, and community members wrote of their specific concerns and of their support for the open letter and funnel statement. By the close of the response period, over three hundred individual responses were submitted. There would not be a resolution on the proposal, however, until the LCSH Quarterly Editorial Meeting, which raised its own questions and concerns.

The date of the Quarterly Meeting (January 17, 2025) was announced in mid-December 2024. A link for registering to attend the meeting went live on January 13, 2025. Within hours, the maximum number of attendees (seventy-five) had been reached and an announcement relaying this information was posted on January 14. That day, discussion surrounding this attendance cap appeared on the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) listserv where several individuals raised concerns about the impact of limiting attendance. One person pointed out that less than twenty-four hours passed between the initial announcement and the notice of the limit being reached. Another added that, because of the nature of when these announcements were sent, librarians in different time zones were disadvantaged in being able to register. A third pointed to the current PCC statistics, which indicate that there are currently 290 full institutional members, meaning that only one quarter of the participating institutions would be able to attend based on the seventy-five person limit.

These concerns reflected those raised when, on June 3, 2024, PTCP announced that it would change the LCSH editorial meetings from a monthly to a quarterly schedule with the intent to “pursue wider discussions of how LCSH can change [with the] move to linked data, discuss potential projects to improve terms...or propose updates to documentation.” At that time, an open letter to PTCP was published on Cataloging Lab expressing concerns over the impact that this schedule change would have on editorial decision-making. Co-signed by 211 individuals and organizations, the letter expressed that the previous practice of holding monthly, open editorial meetings had served to “demystif[y] the SACO process for many librarians,” and allowed many to learn about the proposal process while also offering impactful feedback on proposals themselves. By changing the schedule and broadening the scope of these meetings, the letter noted that “reducing external [to LOC] librarian attendance...will result in less librarian input on individual proposals, vastly diminishing the possibilities for learning and shared decision-making.” While requesting that LOC reconsider the scheduling change, the letter suggested that LOC and PTCP might offer open office hours for “consultation and collaboration,” encouraging increased and varied participation from librarians in the proposal process.

Notably, nowhere in the June 3rd announcement was it mentioned that the quarterly meetings would have an attendance limit. The current wording on the “SACO Calendar” webpage only mentions that registration will be required to attend. The “Meeting News, Events, Reports” page, however, mentions that the September 2024 meeting was limited to 100 attendees. In the case of the January 17th meeting, PTCP sent out another announcement on January 15th, indicating that the attendance limit would be lifted and that the impact of a fully open session on discussion would be assessed. On January 17th, the meeting went forward as planned with over 100 attendees present. The first

item on the agenda was the proposal to change “Trans-exclusionary radical feminism,” which was summarily rejected following the nearly four hundred responses received from the community.

So, what did we learn? LCSH is often derided for the way it lags behind common usage of terminology and for its fundamental biases. There are, however, ways to enact the type of changes librarians and archivists want to see in the vocabulary. The largest roadblock to this is the complexity of the proposal process, but it is not insurmountable. The PCC funnel structure is one way to enable community members of all levels of understanding to participate in shaping the standard. Funnels not only bring together individuals who are experienced in the proposal process, but also offer an entry point for subject experts, early-career librarians, and students. At the same time, funnels give individuals who would otherwise face retribution for their work an opportunity to participate in collective action and advocacy while remaining anonymous. The success and responsiveness of the Gender and Sexuality Funnel demonstrates this by leveraging their collective knowledge to lay a foundation upon which others can begin to build and articulate their opinions, concerns, and suggestions. This will not be the last time a subject proposal elicits such a strong response from the library and archives community, but it does provide a timely reminder of the importance of advocating for transparency in practices. Processes like the LCSH proposal process have the potential to greatly impact the lives and perceptions of particular communities, and open communication is crucial to enabling the community to take direct and meaningful action.

The next LCSH Quarterly Editorial Meeting is scheduled for April 18, 2025. Take time to peruse the tentative lists before then and consider if you want to participate in the subject proposal process.

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