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Towards a Universal Cataloguing Code: Cultural Biases in Descriptive Metadata

Introduction

Descriptive metadata practices today demonstrate a long lineage of cultural bias that have come under scrutiny in a globalized and interconnected world, these traits providing the hallmarks of the Information Age. How are cultural institutions and the cataloguing authorities that define their collections addressing this urgent issue? Can records be universal, and if so, how are trends in descriptive practices indicative of a universality of the record? The following paper is a survey of the issues faced by cultural organizations (be they an archive, museum, or library) in this new digital age. An emphasis is made on the bibliographic cataloguing authorities such as the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR and its various iterations) in part because of their influence across the cultural sector.¹ The topic presents itself in a field that is redefining itself amid wide change in a digital context. Its highest aim is interoperability for the sake of the user, this latter concept another result of the democratization of knowledge brought about by the Information Age. It is precisely for this reason that cultural bias emerges as a pressing issue; inaccuracy of cultural records is a disappointment to people when they are not fully reflected in them.²

¹ While a library have been the main authorities on such cataloging codes, their increasingly multimedia collections have paved the way for their implementation across a broad spectrum of institutions such as audiovisual archives.

² Knowlton, 125. The Library of Congress Subject Headings, which will be discussed in a later section, represent a long history of cultural bias in official records. On this topic, Stevel Knowlton writes: “By utilizing the language and perspective of a particular group of readers, rather than seeking a more neutral set of terms, LCSH 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.”

Instead of drawing concrete conclusions, the essay serves as a document of preliminary findings for an issue that is ripe with complexity. A few aims in the research is to identify potential points of departure between the rules set out by authorities (such as AACR) and natural tendencies by institutions existing outside of these “Anglo-American” parameters. The essay would like to theorize on the *Anglo-American-ness* of such classification systems,³ but does not dwell on this too much outside of recognizing that the largely English-originating cataloging authorities that inform cultural records are symptomatic of outside economic and political factors that have shaped history from the Industrial Revolution into the present day. These factors are what have allowed the English language to flourish as the lingua franca of the world and by extension, modern technology and digital communication. Instead, the essay primarily centers around the description of human subjects included in such records as opposed to the more formal aspects of classification. To aid this purpose, an audiovisual archivist in Bogotá, Colombia was interviewed to gain first-hand insight of issues in a non English-speaking environment.

The scope of this essay is admittedly restrained. With such an expansive field that wrestles cultural products, their records, and the contexts in which they were created, the topic deserves to be explored more fully, perhaps in the form of a survey conducted across institutions that rely on these cataloguing rules. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to parse through these issues and their local and international applications.⁴

³ Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* comes to mind as a helpful guide in understanding this Protestant worldview of economic prosperous regions of the world, that though not entirely composed of English-speaking countries, are considerably so. His theories on the conditions of salvation for a member of society has helped shape social theory in the American context—racism and the marginalization of non-white peoples in the United States and their classification within society is undoubtedly reflected by their placement in the written record and in turn, history.

⁴ The author would like to make a more concrete distinction between bibliographic codes and ones designed specifically for audiovisual media (e.g. FIAF Moving Image Cataloguing Manual) however, for the sake of expediency, they are addressed in this paper without proper qualification with the underlying notion that many of these auxiliary codes are informed by larger bibliographic authorities such as the aforementioned AACR.

The Euro-American Origins of Cataloging Standards and their International Ubiquity

At the 1997 International Conference on the Principles and Future Development of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (AACR), fifty-three participants deliberated on the longevity of this cataloging code that, from the 1970s and up until that point, had helped usher in a new era of cataloging wanting to reconcile “Euro-American” tendencies against an increasingly international (and later *digital*) backdrop.⁵ The history of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules have been complicated by their many overhauls throughout the years. A derisive though informative summary of this is found in the introduction to Gorman and Oddy’s paper presented at that conference, *The Anglo-American Cataloging Rules Second Edition: Their History and Principles*:

“It is possible that the Anglo-American cataloging rules, second edition, is the most spectacularly misnamed bibliographic standard in history. AACR2 has far less in common with its titular predecessor—the Anglo-American catalog[u]ing rules of 1967 (AACR1)—than that code had with its predecessors, the ALA rules of 1949, the Library of Congress Rules for descriptive cataloging of 1949, and the Catalog[u]ing rules of 1908. The description of AACR2 as a ‘second edition’ arose first from its history—in the early 1970s, the idea was nothing much more than a harmonization of the American and British texts of AACR1 and some less than fundamental modifications—and then from political expediency. In the later stages of the creation of AACR2, it became obvious that this code was to be a radical departure—one that was going to be vociferously opposed by many administrators and bibliographic reactionaries. It is entirely possible that an entirely new name—say, ‘Integrated cataloging rules for English-speaking countries’—would have scuppered the whole enterprise.”⁶

This quote places the AACR among a family of standards of American and British origin. It also reveals how rapid changes to the nature of libraries—their interconnectivity via technology and their increasingly multimedia and multilingual holdings—have prompted them to look outside their particular context in which they were created to accommodate a universal and international

⁵ "International Conference on the Principles & Future Development of AACR." Archived Site of the Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA., accessed May 6, 2018, <http://www.rda-jsc.org/archivedsite/intlconf1.html>.

⁶ Gorman and Oddy, 1.

approach. In “Recycling the Past: Historical Development of Modern Catalogues and Cataloguing Codes,” Ramat Fattahi writes:

“In the twentieth century, a number of significant factors have affected libraries in their operations and practices, including descriptive cataloguing. These factors are: the steady growth in the number of libraries and the size of collections, as an indirect indication of social and technological change; a rapid increase in the number of publications in book and non-book form which led to the 'information explosion' in the twentieth century and the tendency to, and need for, more and closer international relations. There was a strong trend towards international cooperation and the exchange of ideas in the early twentieth century. The role of national libraries and library associations in formulating bibliographic standards is considered to have been a significant factor in the development of cataloguing codes and the move toward national as well as international standardisation. In the Anglo-American world, the move toward closer cooperation and formulation of joint codes is a clear expression of such trends in the cataloguing community.”⁷

These rules that originally were meant for a particular cultural context now grapple a desire to become universal and widespread. The Paris Principles (PP), established in 1961 by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) to address many of the points made by Fattahi, served as a launching point for national libraries across the world wanting to increase international collaboration. One example is the Nippon Cataloguing Rules (NCR), which can be used as a potential study of the cultural differences presented in the more formal qualities to classification codes. The NCR is a Japanese cataloging code established in 1965 after the drafting of the PP. The rules slightly amend the PP by privileging subjects instead of subject headings, this written in more detail in Haruki Nagata’s *Nippon (Japanese) Cataloging Rules and International Cataloging Principles: Similarities and Differences*.⁸ A worthwhile

⁷ Fattahi, Ramat. 1996. "Recycling The Past: Historical Development of Modern Catalogues and Cataloguing Codes" *The Relevance of Cataloguing Principles to the Online Environment: An Historical and Analytical Study*. University of New South Wales.

⁸ Haruki, 125. “Japanese libraries traditionally have relied on classification systems to represent subject but have less emphasis on subject headings. Many libraries do not assign subject headings.”

question to explore would be the aspects of Japanese culture that privilege one kind of information over the other. Could this have something to do with *gojūon*, their unique alphabetical order? Another curious note to investigate would be the resulting internal fissures that emerged after the introduction of the NCR. This came in the form of a competing cataloging rule, the *Text for Technical Processing: Guidelines for Simplified Practices*. This later set was crafted by small to medium-sized libraries, those catering to specific pockets of society in Japan as opposed to national or university libraries that work alongside other international institutions. The *Text for Technical Processing* was formed by these more boutique libraries wishing to do away with the NCR's cumbersome rules. At the center of the internationalization of these cultural institutions in the role of the user. The tension between the user in this global setting is what has enabled conversations on cultural bias and customization; records can no longer forego convenience and consistency in the form of hard-and-fast rules at the expense of accuracy and inclusivity.

The topic of cultural bias in cataloguing practices have been extensively discussed before, most notably through Sanford Berman's 1971 monograph *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People (P&A)*. The LCSH, along with the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, represent two widely used standards (the former the content or vocabulary and the latter providing the structure for how the information is organized) that were created within a Western and Eurocentric context. Berman's paper identified pervasive ideas to the way marginalized people are written into records using these codes.⁹ Despite it being widely cited and much debated, Berman's findings took a considerable amount of time to see

⁹ For examples, see Knowlton's "Table I. LCSH Headings Changed in Ways that Reflect Berman's Suggestions." The table demonstrates subject headings that normalize the criminalization of people of color through derogatory terms.

actual change. Steven Knowlton's *Three Decades Since Prejudices and Antipathies: A Study of Changes in the Library of Congress Subject Headings* provides a useful tool for studying the recalcitrance of authorities such as the Library of Congress, providing tables that delineate and contrast Berman's recommendations against changes (or lack thereof) implemented three decades after its publication. The most important point that Berman and Knowlton's ideas bring to mind is the consideration given to the audience—who, exactly, is supposed to use the records? Wide assumptions have been made by the creators of the LCSH. Knowlton writes that in cataloguing theory, subject headings are written with the end-user in mind, using vocabulary and terms that would be natural to them.¹⁰ The end-user or researcher in this scenario is by default Christian, white, heterosexual, and male.¹¹ Only until now has this figure come under scrutiny.¹²

Customization of the Catalog

A unique correlation exists to the international approach of cataloguing rules vis-a-vis their local application. This correlation inherent to descriptive metadata practices is expressed as a friction between international codes and their individual users. According to Luisa Ordóñez,¹³ Head Advisor on Collection Management, Curating, and Cataloguing at Señal Memoria (the

¹⁰ Knowlton, 124. "The heading . . . should be that which the reader will seek in the catalog, if we know or can presume what the reader will look under" . . . In other words, the subject headings assigned to works in the catalog should be what a particular type of library patron would be most likely to search under—regardless of the notion of universal bibliographic control, to which the LC is also committed (Miksa 1983). Whatever the merits of this principle in theory, critics find it troublesome in practice. The crux of their objections lies in the identity of the "average" reader . . ."

¹¹ Knowlton, 124.

¹² In the American context, this has taken shape in groups like the establishing of the Racism and Sexism in Subject Analysis Subcommittee in 1980. (Knowlton, 125).

¹³ Calle, Danielle. (April 22, 2018) Skype interview with Luisa F. Ordóñez. The express purpose of this interview was to gain first-hand insight on the issues faced by cultural workers in a non-English speaking environment. This interview took on an informal approach and was facilitated by Juana Suárez at NYU Tisch's Moving Image Archiving Preservation Program.

audiovisual archive of RTVC Sistema de Medios Públicos), the Library of Congress Subject Headings rarely inspire trust. For example, some well-known subjects who are deceased are not up-to-date in the record to reflect their passing.¹⁴ Since 2013, Señal Memoria has been amassing the audiovisual collections of RTVC to mobilize those materials around an online archive. For this, Ordóñez and her team primarily use the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) Cataloguing Rules in addition to FIAF Moving Image Cataloguing Manual. Because their archive centers around Colombian television and radio history, the controlled vocabularies currently in place are insufficient to properly catalog their collection. The team at Señal Memoria is currently undergoing a major thesaurus project to tackle this issue. This serves as an example on the importance of contextualization and the need for local interpretation of records. Ordóñez has written eloquently about this in her essay *Epistemology of Audiovisual Archives in Colombia*:

“The validation of preservation processes must also be done from home. In addition to the systematization of local experiences, it is important to enhance the knowledge of audiovisual professionals and archivists who have led the preservation processes in the country, both from previous generations and from recent generations. Although there is a great advantage in the discussion with international peers, sometimes their participation in academic spaces consists in the presentation of case studies from models and contexts that are far from having application in our territory: the technological lag and the lack of theoretical corpus in Spanish *conditions the validation of the self against the foreign*. That is why it is essential that communities of interpretation be built in training spaces and meetings in the field of audiovisual preservation. In addition to agreeing on methodologies, they allow for debate and disagreement on the scope of activities of its members and empower the possibilities of consensus to build knowledge from local experiences.”¹⁵

¹⁴ An attempt was made by the author to find a specific example since none was given by Ordóñez, however, a general query for Álvaro Uribe (the former president of Colombia) on the Library of Congress website led to a VIAF link that had an image of a book—*Una lengua sin regimen*—with Fidel Castro on the cover. Though not an exact example of what Ordóñez described, it gives the impression that somehow, large authorities are perhaps too massive to get the details right.

¹⁵ Ordóñez Ortegón, 15-16.

The validating of the “self against the foreign” is further evidence of the tension that has been described. In this particular context (an archive in a Latin American country) the desire to be useful to Colombian citizens is the primary goal, especially given the digital aspects of Señal Memoria’s collections. From a historical perspective, this is a major leap to the way users have been understood in this region. Hector J. Maymí-Sugrañes’ *Latin American Archival Theory and Practice during the 1970s and 1980s* is a helpful summary of issues faced by laypersons unaffiliated with a governmental or academic institutions. A substantial amount of bureaucratic impediments at national libraries and archives made information access during that era extremely difficult citizens of these Latin American countries.¹⁶

Today, most educational and cultural environments strongly advocate for open access, and promote the use of their holdings through the Internet. The 2009 and 2016 updates to the Paris Principles—the Statement of International Cataloguing Principles (ICP)—makes a point to explicitly define who this user is in a new, open access environment.¹⁷ In UNESCO’s *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles*, Ray Edmondson passionately makes a call to action for the arbiters of audiovisual collections:

“Why, after a century of audiovisual archiving activity, have questions of professional identity, philosophy and theory, formal training and accreditation now come into focus? In a field pioneered by passionate individualists, generational change towards a greater reliance on formal theory and structures has been slow. But as institutional archives have grown, the days of intuition, idiosyncrasy, personality archiving, learning-on-the-job and making-it-up-as-you-go have passed because ultimately they are self-limiting. The day of the passionate individualist may be over, but the day of the passionate individual is here.

¹⁶ Maymí-Sugrañes, 232. “Inter-American archival theory during the 1970s and 1980s embraced a preset notion of whom archival users should be. On one hand, the United States supported the idea that archives should be open to all kinds of users. Latin American archivists, on the other hand, maintained the cultural value which mandated that archives should only be available to a selected elite...”

¹⁷ Bertolini et al, 4. “This 2016 edition takes into consideration new categories of users, the open access environment, the interoperability and the accessibility of data, features of discovery tools and the significant change of user behaviour in general.”

It is only individuals working together who can build the stable and secure institutions needed to ensure the ongoing protection and accessibility of the audiovisual heritage.”¹⁸

To ensure an inclusive approach on both the individual and international level, the locus is now on the user, alongside existing institutions, to demand accuracy of the record.

Towards a Universal Approach

If “the medium is the message” and metadata is the integral tool of information-sharing among cultural institutions, then its language must be carefully considered when advocating for changes to existing cataloging structures.¹⁹ This quest for a bias-neutral approach of the record has led to a better understanding of the timeline and history of cultural records and where they stand today. Cultural biases in descriptive metadata is a complex issue mired by the fact that many revisions to the cataloging codes build off of each other for the sake of continuity instead of practicality. Many of these codes predate the Information Age, further complicating the issue.

The fact that cultural bias exist remains due to Western and Eurocentric cataloging codes is a frustrating truth for many cultural institutions. However, records and record-keeping are not unique trait of the Western world; for historical reasons, outside systems have not been spurred to the international stage until now. Across cultures and time periods, the inherent qualities or essence of the record do not change, and this notion can be exploited for future applications in the digital age. In “The Records: Where Archival Universality Resides” Luciana Duranti posits that the digital age is allowing a “universalization” of the record.

“This increasing convergence of different societies, undoubtedly relate communication—in the all inclusive sense given to the word by Innis —reveals itself in the context of *the*

¹⁸ Edmondson, 17.

¹⁹ A famous passage attributed to Marshall McLuhan, from his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

record, and is determining the development of a shared world-view that does not replace the pre-existent ones, but attempt live with them in a relation of complementarity and continuity. Confronted with these new, global developments, what is the archivist to do? Withdraw in his or her own cultural environment and cultivate the memorials of past actions and events? Or rather, attempt to understand the new ways in which the world communicates and the material media of this communication, the new shared, global, universal record?”²⁰

As libraries and cultural institutions grapple with collections in an ever-globalized environment, an internationalist approach is needed with each successive change. Recent developments such as FRBR and RDA (the successor to AACR) are indicative of this new internationalist and simultaneously digital / “user-focused” approach. While there is hope in these new models, other biases prevail such as access to technology and literacy. These major obstacles stand to be tested in the near future if cultural institutions are to attain a truer sense of inclusivity and representation in the historical record.

²⁰ Duranti, 87.

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