

Critical Cataloging: Examining LCSH as Text

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LCSH History and Changes

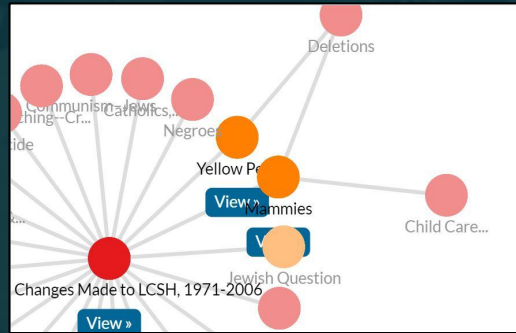
[Library of Congress Subject Headings \(LCSH\)](#) are a form of controlled vocabulary that allows library patrons to find sources on a specific subject. These subject headings were created by the Library of Congress in 1898, and feature hierarchical organization, broader and narrower terms, and geographic references. Despite consistent updates, many LCSH continue to be firmly based in hegemonic ideologies, and many outdated or outright offensive subject headings that describe materials about minorities, women, and other marginalized groups are still used in LCSH today. A vocal group of “critical catalogers”, including Sanford Berman, began to advocate for significant changes in the early 1970s.

Berman suggested 225 updates or deletions for LCSH that would eliminate some of the ideological biases that impact content about marginalized groups. He argues that these changes are necessary for the continued relevance of LCSH, and that to ignore the need for substantive updates would go against the “idea [that libraries] do not exhibit bias” and that there is a duty for catalogers to identify their own blindspots and “not reinforce the psychological, sociological, economic, or political assumptions and prejudices of their readers” (Berman, p. 18). Berman’s monograph [Prejudices and Antipathies](#) has become a rallying cry for other “critical catalogers” that seek to update LCSH, and the work has been cited 221 times and was reissued with a new preface in 1993.

Narrative Visualization

[Critical Cataloging](#) was created in Scalar and features two distinct visualizations. The first is a timeline. Each data point on the timeline provides information on LCSH changes using Berman’s primary text justifications and juxtaposes related images of groups to the subject headings that seek to define them.

The second is a tag cloud that shows specific changes within LCSH. Users can interact with each data point, and yellow data points indicate that there is more information attached. Scalar also provides the user with a number of affordances that explain different levels of interactivity, including a detailed key at the bottom of the tag cloud, and an overlay when a user first visits the page that explains how to use the timeline effectively.



Pedagogical Possibilities

[Critical Cataloging](#) was created to be a tool for library and information science instructors to use to illustrate the ideals and ideologies that underpin LCSH. [Drabinski \(2013\)](#) argues that understanding the history of LCSH changes and the hegemonic underpinnings of the classification scheme is vital not just for critical catalogers, but also for the students and public service librarians that make use of LCSH for their personal research, as outdated or problematic terms can “teach” users to feel a specific way about the subject matter. For example:

...locating materials about transsexuality at RC560.G45, the point in the classification schedule for Sexual and psychosexual conditions, suggests that transsexuality is a psychological disorder that can be remedied with treatment, rather than just another way of existing in a gendered world, or a political position, or a religious or philosophical experience (Drabinski, 2013, n. pag.).

Critical catalogers focus on advocating for updates to LCSH to avoid situations like this, but public-facing librarian theorists like Adler (2013) and Drabinski (2013) worry that simply updating the terms can in fact obscure implicit bias that can never be completely removed from a classification system that must be more resistant to change than colloquial terminology in order to facilitate use. [Critical Cataloging: Examining LCSH as Text](#) seeks to provide specific visual examples of changes to LCSH on a timeline that show underlying ideologies of the classification system that can be used within a library instructional research session.

