Report
Task Group on
Social Justice in Academic Libraries

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Overview

After Safiya Noble's presentation at the LAUC-B joint assembly in 2017, the LAUC-B Executive Committee (ExComm) sought to investigate search engine bias and questionable metadata assigned to cultural communities and library systems. LAUC-B ExComm charged a Task Group on Social Justice in Academic Libraries with conducting an environmental scan of libraries at peer institutions to identify and evaluate projects/initiatives that aim to:

1. Raise awareness of bias in metadata and algorithms in search engines and library systems.

2. Expand information literacy instruction to consider issues of cultural bias when evaluating results and sources.
3. Advocate for improved metadata and algorithms in library systems.

Lastly, the charge also called for the group to conduct an environmental scan of campus institutes and units to identify potential partners and speakers who are working on related issues. (See Charge).

Process

To meet its charge, the Task Group researched and compiled listservs of librarians working in metadata and/or instruction services. Task Group members created and disseminated a survey —with metadata and search engine bias as its two main components—aimed at identifying projects and assessing the degree to which institutions are engaged in this type of work.

Listservs Contacted:

- LAUC Statewide Diversity Committee
- Black Caucus of ALA
- American Indian Library Association
- REFORMA
- Asian Pacific American Librarians Association
- Chinese American Librarians Association
- Reference & User Services Assoc (RUSA)
- University Libraries Section
- CALAFIA
- GLBTRT roundtable of ALA
- ALCTS Metadata Enrichment Task Force
- ALCTS Cataloging and Classification Research Interest Group
- ALCTS Collection Evaluation and Assessment Interest Group
- ALCTS Collection Development Issues for the Practitioner Interest Group
- Music Library Association
- ACRL- Diversity Committee
- ALA Metadata Interest group
- LITA Search Engine Interest Group
- METADATA Librarians Listserv

- ▪ Instruction Section (ACRL)
- ▪ African American Studies Librarians Interest Group

Upon the completion of the survey, Task Group members evaluated the answers and reached out to respondents who provided projects and/or literature, or who were conducting research on the issue. Other members conducted an environmental scan of the literature and have provided a series of relevant summaries below.
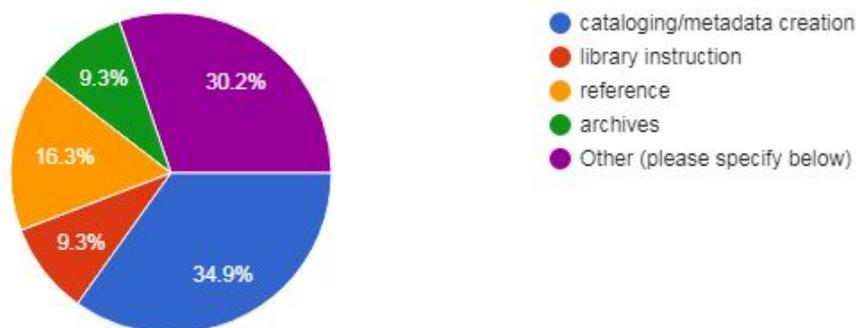
Through its work, the Task Group identified campus resources and individuals who could partner with LAUC-B to educate library staff and users as well as identify potential solutions. The Task Group received input from various Library colleagues who identified campus committees, researchers, and units interested in the field of metadata and search engine bias.

Survey Responses

There were 43 responses to the survey. Respondents self-identified as follows:

Does your library work involve:

43 responses

- ● cataloging/metadata creation
- ● library instruction
- ● reference
- ● archives
- ● Other (please specify below)

Other: Respondents who selected "other" mostly worked in the listed areas, but held more than one job responsibility. These positions were in the following areas (with some duplication):
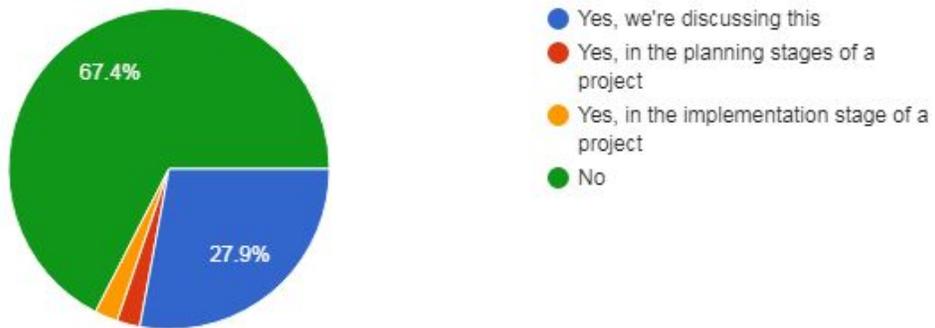
- ▪ Research/Reference/Instruction/Publishing (6)
- ▪ Special collections/Archives (2)
- ▪ Access services (1)

- ▪ Acquisitions (1)
- ▪ More than 3 job titles/"everything" (6)

Responses to the question about search engine bias:

Are you or your library/organization engaged in work in the area of search engine bias?
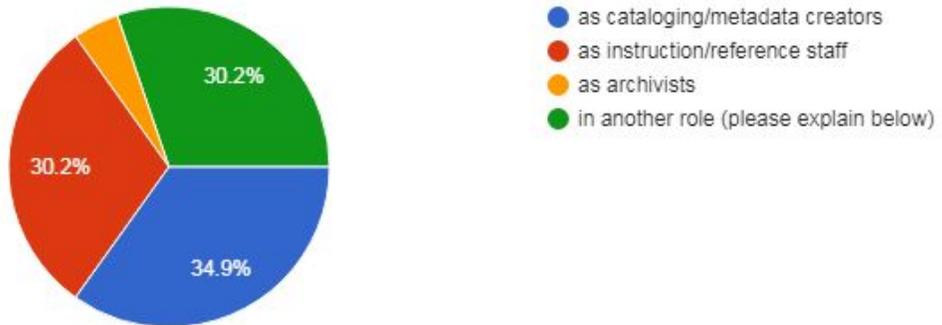
43 responses

- Yes, we're discussing this
- Yes, in the planning stages of a project
- Yes, in the implementation stage of a project
- No

67.4%

27.9%

Responses to the question about library systems/metadata bias:

Do you or your library/organization engage with issues of bias in library systems and metadata?

43 responses

- as cataloging/metadata creators
- as instruction/reference staff
- as archivists
- in another role (please explain below)

30.2%

30.2%

34.9%

Summary of Findings

Work on search engine and library systems bias is ongoing and new projects and publications were appearing even as the Task Group worked to compile the final report. We anticipate that this pace will continue, especially in the area of search engine bias. Our survey responses and literature review should be considered representative rather than exhaustive.

Cataloging and Metadata Bias:

The University of Alberta formed the Decolonizing Description Working Group to investigate, define, and propose a plan of action for how they could more accurately, appropriately, and respectfully represent Indigenous peoples and contexts through their descriptive metadata practices. One of the core recommendations from the Group was to hire an individual to help them coordinate the work to make this effort part of their sustainable workflows. Following this recommendation, they successfully hired an Academic Resident Librarian.

Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University has collections in ethnomusicology, anthropology, folklore, and linguistics, many of which are not covered well by LCSH and LCGFT. To improve their records, they use the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus in addition to LCSH and LCGFT. They also use the Human Relations Area Files' Outline of World Cultures codes which are added locally.

Music Library Association (MLA) members are working to address and avoid instances of bias in LCSH. MLA Cataloging and Metadata Committee and contributors to the SACO (Subject Authority Cooperative Program) Music Funnel Project have been developing controlled vocabularies for genres/forms (LCGFT), medium of performance (LCMPT), and demographic terms (LCDGT).

Humboldt State University is currently evaluating bias in subject headings describing Indigenous peoples. As part of this project, they collect data about keyword searches regarding Native Americans to see if their users can retrieve appropriate records by using certain keywords. Their next step is to use a tagging feature in their discovery layer to add keywords to some records to see if that makes any difference. The librarian we interviewed is also considering creating local authority records. She would

eventually like to use this data to suggest changes to the LCSH records for local Indigenous peoples in Humboldt County

Steven W. Holloway of **James Madison University** teaches a workshop on decolonizing metadata for librarian faculty and staff. To improve their library records, he also creates culturally appropriate authority records and adds subject headings from alternative thesauri.

Jesse R. Erickson of t**he University of Delaware** recently taught a course that centered on how to provide metadata for a collection of historical postcards and trade cards, many of which are racially insensitive or even racist in terms of their illustrations and graphic design.

The University of Alabama is conducting a project on the effectiveness of searches that are executed in the university's discovery layer by using the data collected in Google Analytics. The first part does not address bias, but they are planning to eventually research relevancy, precision, and synonyms of subject headings.

MIT Libraries sponsored the [Collections Directorate Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice Task Force](). The Task Force identified areas in which they could advance the values of diversity, inclusion, and social justice: their impact on MIT students, their impact on the scholarly publishing and academic library marketplace, and their impact on posterity and the scholarly, cultural, and historical record. Their strategies and ideas are focused on the scholarly publishing and academic library marketplace, representation of marginalized perspectives and community inclusion and outreach, and building organizational infrastructure for diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

Cataloging and Metadata Bias Literature Review

In regards to bias in metadata, numerous articles describe bias and insensitive expressions in LC subject headings. Possible solutions suggested by some include replacing subject headings with keywords from the text, collecting descriptive tags from users performing catalog and article database searches, and consulting with subject experts or even authors themselves to decide on subject descriptions or terms.

Search Engine Bias Literature Review

The work we have encountered about search engine bias focuses on educating staff and users. Most of the articles we have found do not address specific teaching strategies.The

bibliography and resources page for search engine bias) lists a few lesson plans or libguides created by librarians and undoubtedly many more will be created in the near future. We hope that these resources will inspire staff to learn about the issues, share ideas and strategies, and feel confident passing on their knowledge to our users.

Recommended Activities

The Executive Committee plans to charge another task group to carry out the recommendations in this report. We recommend that members of the current Task Group, as well as members of the LAUC-B Committee on Diversity, be given the opportunity to participate in this group and continue their work in these areas.

Recommendations for Cataloging and Metadata Bias:

The Task Group recommends that LAUC-B ExComm ask the University Librarian to appoint a special library-wide committee to work on projects relating to bias in metadata and cataloging. This would be a separate group from the Task Group that will plan the events recommended below.

Removing inappropriate or outdated subject headings through Library of Congress is a bureaucratic and lengthy process. As alternatives, the Task Group has identified the following six approaches that could be explored by this committee:

1. Instruction—Educate users about biases in our library catalog and databases.
2. Folksonomies—Investigate possibility of supplementing records with user added tags
3. Alternative thesauri —Explore the use of appropriate alternative thesauri.
4. Analytics-driven research—Conduct research using data on users' search behavior in discovery layer, catalog, and/or databases (in terms of what search terms they use and what results they get)
5. Discovery layer —Explore the possibility of adding alternative thesauri or other types of search terms to the discovery layer.
6. Digital collections —Create best practices for avoiding metadata bias in describing digital collections

- Event: We would also like to recommend a brown bag for staff.

Recommendations for Search Engine Bias:

The focus of our group is on search engine bias (and cataloging/metadata bias, above), but the conversation, both scholarly and non-scholarly, is related to other issues: manipulation of social media (including the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal), disinformation and fake news, big data and algorithmic justice, among many others (see bibliography). Our recommendations focus on search engine bias, but we also recommend that library staff stay alert to these related issues. There are many efforts on campus to use data to improve educational outcomes, such as our own Library assessment program and the increased use in the field of education of learning analytics. We note that the campus' draft Strategic Plan proposes a signature initiative on "Inclusive Intelligence" (page 9). We hope that library staff, along with the rest of the campus community, will stay vigilant against the use of biased algorithms and the invasion of users' privacy in these initiatives.

Some of these topics may be suitable for exploration at the next LAUC-B Conference.

At UCB the Instruction Services Division is already considering the creation of libguides, instructional materials, a bibliography of readings and possibly outreach to students. Cody Hennesy organized a discussion at the Academic Innovation Studio on Algorithmic Bias in Search and Research for librarians and instructors on April 18 (see blog post.). ISD staff have said they would welcome input on ideas and projects from library staff.

Events Already Planned:

Research 4 Resistance, a group of campus librarians, is planning a brown bag discussion of *Algorithms of Oppression* (now an e-book, no limit on number of simultaneous UCB users) in July. The event will be open to all library staff. Note: event plans can change; if the event does not take place, the Task Group recommends sponsoring a similar event.

Potential events:

- ▪ **Event # 1**: A lecture aimed at educating library staff and the campus community about the issues of search engine bias, including but not limited to: techniques used to manipulate search results, such as search engine optimization (white hat and black hat), search engine manipulation effect, google bombing, spamdexing,

etc.); the social impact of search engine bias; what individuals can do to mitigate these impacts; what organized efforts exist to mitigate these impacts.

Potential Partners:

FSM Cafe Events, American Cultures Center, I-School, Algorithmic Fairness and Opacity Group, among others.

▪ **Event #2:** Brown bag discussion among library instructors/reference staff about strategies for educating our users

Potential partners: Instructor Development Program