

viewpoint

Ethical cataloguing in action

The ARLIS UK & Ireland Cataloguing & Classification Committee supports the cataloguing and classification of all art materials in libraries, promoting effective discovery of library resources for the visual arts, architecture and design, and by supporting development and research in the sector. In the first half of 2021 we organised two webinars, one an introduction to cataloguing given by Victoria Parkinson¹, and the second a demonstration of cataloguing by Amy Staniforth, alongside her colleagues Simon French and Lloyd Roderick². From the attendance and feedback, and it was clear there was an appetite for more talks that introduced aspects of cataloguing.

In the past few years, the critical librarianship movement has brought more attention and resources to the ongoing work of examining the ethical implications of cataloguing. Critical cataloguing is a topic that can seem daunting even to experienced cataloguers, let alone non-cataloguing library workers, so we wanted to be able to introduce the topic without requiring cataloguing knowledge. Dr Deborah Lee offered to do an introductory talk about ethics in cataloguing³, which was extremely positively received, and we decided to build on Deborah's introduction with a series of lunchtime webinars to showcase projects that were practical examples of ethical cataloguing, and held online so that they could be as accessible as possible.

The eight talks we hosted did an excellent job of bringing to life various aspects of critical cataloguing work. The Cataloguing Code of Ethics⁴, introduced and explained by Jane Daniels and Diane Pennington contains ten statements of ethical principles to help cataloguers and libraries to reflect on their policies and practice and is a collaboration between American, British and Canadian members of the cataloguing community, and with real life examples sourced from the cataloguing community.

1. Parkinson, Victoria, "An Introduction to Cataloguing", 29 January 2021, <https://youtu.be/WQyTO4kOe4M>

2. Staniforth, Amy, French, Simon and Roderick, Lloyd, "Catalogue that!", 16 April 2021, https://youtu.be/eUkQ_aVEAns

3. Lee, Deborah, "Cataloguing and classification ethics: an ARLIS online talk", 10 December 2021, <https://youtu.be/5dtEm68SYgQ>

4. Daniels, Jane and Pennington, Diane, "ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: Cataloguing code of Ethics 2021", 29 May 2022, <https://youtu.be/Mv0WRyeFwxg>



Nicole Brandon presenting "Decolonization, Distance and Ethics: Cataloguing & Classification of North American Indigenous Knowledge in UK Libraries"

Nicole Brandon⁵ and Rebecca Slatcher⁶ talked about the British Library's North American Indigenous collections. Rebecca discussed how cataloguing has perpetuated colonialism and oppression to the point of hiding Indigenous language material from discovery in the catalogue, and how that is being addressed. Nicole explored the ways in which libraries can take actions to make a beneficial difference to Indigenous communities thousands of miles away, showing that it is not only possible, but ethically urgent.

The British Library has an ambitious Race Equality Action Plan, and Alan Danskin⁷ took us through the work being done on the metadata strand of the plan, looking at the challenges posed by a catalogue and metadata that goes back many years, through language changes and changing times. One aspect will be to build on the Inclusive Terminology Glossary created by Carissa Chew⁸ for the National Library of Scotland, to identify and address harmful terminology in the catalogue. And we heard directly from Carissa as she explained the importance of addressing language in order to begin to address some of the harm done and gave some examples of small but significant changes the National Library of Scotland has made so far terminology used in the catalogue descriptions written by cataloguers in the past.

Ananda Rutherford⁹ presented the TANC funded Provisional Semantics project that aimed to produce guidance on ethical methodologies for 'how this work could and should be done and how to keep doing it' by reviewing three pilot decolonisation projects held at the National Trust, Imperial War Museum and Tate.

Talks from Curstaidh Reid and David Woodbridge¹⁰ on the work the British Library Qatar Foundation and from Eyob Derillo on the British Library's Ethiopian collections highlighted use of technology to help enable discovery and access to the collections. The Qatar Digital Library is a free online portal providing access to material from its collections related to the Islamic world, the Arabic cultural heritage and the modern history of the Gulf. The portal is bilingual and Curstaidh and David discussed the collaboration between cataloguers and translators to create bilingual catalogue records that handle changes in nuance and terminology between two languages and over time, addressing offensive or outdated language in some of the materials.

Eyob Derillo¹¹ gave a fascinating account of the history of the British Library's Ethiopian collections, and the history of the cataloguing of that material which demonstrated and continued the colonial oppression of African countries. Eyob is now able to use TEI (text encoding initiative) to describe the digitised collection with high quality, rich, detailed metadata that addresses some of the historic misinformation and racism of the nineteenth century catalogues.

As might be expected from projects that are examples of cataloguing ethics in practice, challenging the systems and standards we use wove through all the talks, as well as the resourcing of the work.

Rebecca and Alan both mentioned the limitations of MARC language codes; hundreds of North American Indigenous languages are missing entirely from the list, or are covered in an too-general term that means that material will be hidden from users looking for it, so that libraries wanting to mitigate that will need to look to other vocabularies. In the same way when subject headings don't correctly name a community or person, or aren't granular enough, that history is undiscoverable. And the cataloguer-ish desire to classify can embed hierarchies that are then used outside libraries to perpetuate systems of power and privilege.

The need for cataloguing work to be properly resourced with training, budget, and time was another recurring theme and is also principle eight of the Cataloguing Code of Ethics. In the past decade, with the need to cut costs and make budgets stretch as far as possible, libraries have started to purchase "ready-made" catalogue records rather than handcrafting them in house, so that vendors, publishers and outside agencies become key parts of the metadata ecosystem and they also need to be included in critical cataloguing efforts, as Jane and Diane pointed out. At the same time, opportunities for specialist cataloguing training have reduced.

In a profession where people of colour are typically underrepresented, it's not a surprise that these projects are often being undertaken by people who aren't affected by the issues they are addressing; Ananda talked about building time into projects from the start to develop networks with researchers and participants so that the team has specialist expertise and lived experience.

5. Brandon, Nicole, "ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: Decolonization, Distance and Ethics: Cataloguing & Classification of North American Indigenous Knowledge in UK Libraries", 6 May 2022, <https://youtu.be/d0vYUmEnkRQ>

6. Slatcher, Rebecca, "ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: North American Indigenous Languages at the British Library", 20 May 2022, <https://youtu.be/YZbi0EAA3Jg>

7. Danskin, Alan, "ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: British Library Race Equality Action Plan", 13 May 2022, <https://youtu.be/SD0aVq1FrbA>

8. Chew, Carissa, "ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: Inclusive Terminology Glossary", 27 May 2022, https://youtu.be/bb2hMcKz_aY

9. Rutherford, Ananda, ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: Provisional semantics, projects and positionality, 10 June 2022, https://youtu.be/tjTYi_WViSI

10. Reid, Curstaidh and Woodbridge, David, "ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: BL Qatar Foundation Partnership, 31 May 2022, https://youtu.be/dE2D_dhQNTNY

11. Derillo, Eyob, "ARLIS Cat & Class ethics series: Ethiopian cataloguing systems and colonial impact, 17 June 2022, <https://youtu.be/jE8inX0CCEk>

Once it was time for questions we had great engagement from attendees, asking questions and sharing other examples of critical cataloguing projects. Our speakers were frequently asked what role artificial intelligence (AI) might play in helping to address the problems in our records, and in each case the answer was that although automated tools like AI could help—as shown by the British Library Qatar Foundation’s development of an in-house script to cut down to the workload required to examine potentially problematic terminology—much of the work required a genuine human’s input to understand the context.

One thing that stood out throughout the talks was the power and therefore responsibility cataloguers that have to work to address the harm of past practice, and to mitigate potential future harm. And the second thing was that to truly do this, it will need to be addressed systemically, not through individual effort. Hopefully these talks, which are all available on the ARLIS YouTube channel, may encourage further discussion and action as institutions realise the importance of ethics in cataloguing.

ARLIS UK & Ireland Cataloguing and Classification Committee
(Victoria Parkinson, Katie Blackford, Mary Mitchell, Deborah Lee, Annalisa Ricciardi, Lucy Kelsall, Kelly Anyfantaki)