Decolonizing Digital Collections

Rachel Jaffe, Digital Content & Metadata Librarian, UC Santa Cruz
Sarah Lindsey, Head of Metadata Services & Acquisitions Librarian, UC Santa Cruz
Susan Chesley Perry, Head of Digital Initiatives, UC Santa Cruz

Abstract

The need to remove bias from, or to decolonize, library collections and library metadata has been a topic of discussion in the professional library field for several years. In 2001, Hope Olson stated libraries "must be held accountable for poor and biased access to information" in her influential article "The Power to Name."[1] As stewards of the collections in our care, how can we more effectively serve the communities who use and are represented in these collections?

At the UC Santa Cruz library, we have engaged in conversations to address this topic on several fronts. We have evaluated subject descriptors in our local digital objects metadata and identified subject headings that label subjects by gender, race, and ethnicity when that information was not otherwise supplied by the image. Separately, we have explored solutions to the lack of representation for scientists from underrepresented groups in Wikipedia, data which would have allowed us to leverage that information using Wikidata into name authorities for digital objects in our collections.

Activity: Discussion Session

This round table session was offered as a forum for librarians to brainstorm, and to speak to their local efforts to mitigate bias and to increase the visibility of content by and about underrepresented populations. Following a brief introduction, attendees were split into three discussion groups and asked to consider the following questions: How do we approach our legacy data? How to approach the issue of remediation with staff who may have done the original work? Are there ways to involve students or perhaps faculty in this conversation or in this work?

From these small group conversations, several strategies and themes emerged: 1) recognition of the biased nature of LC subject headings and subject analysis; 2) a desire to involve students in retroactive and future descriptive projects; 3) the formulation and inclusion of metadata source notes that describe the provenance of the metadata, provide background or historical context, and call out problematic content; and 4) balancing competing priorities, such as community needs, donor terms, resource

---

[1] Olson, H. (2001). The power to name: representation in library catalogs. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *26*(3), 639–668. https://doi.org/10.1086/495624

limitations, and available tools (controlled vocabularies, best practices, ethical guidelines, etc.).