Metadata &
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Changing the subject

The Homosaurus in Emory University's library catalogue

Tara Kunesh

PINES Bibliographic Services Specialist, Georgia Public Library Service

Jude Romines

Resource Description Specialist, Emory University

ABSTRACT

The classification and cataloguing of LGBTQ+ materials in libraries has been, historically, less than equitable. Mainstream vocabularies such as Library of Congress subject headings are insufficient and inadequate descriptors of LGBTQ+ resources. One modern solution to this imbalance has been the creation of inclusive vocabulary lists designed to replace or enhance outdated and offensive terminology. This paper outlines a project by Emory University librarians to implement one such list - the Homosaurus - throughout their entire catalogue. Outcomes specific to the project, including the benefits and fallbacks of automation versus manual cataloguing, are debated while additional considerations, such as the need for ongoing staff training and consistent policies, are discussed.

In addition, the authors seek to examine the broader picture of inclusive metadata initiatives within the current political climate of the United States. While the Homosaurus has an important role to play in reparative cataloguing, it cannot stand alone and should be employed as part of a general commitment to just and representative metadata.

Introduction

Historically, the classification and cataloguing of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) materials in libraries has been less than inclusive. In the United States, with approximately 21% of Generation Z identifying as LGBTQ+ in 2022 (Jones, 2022), rectifying this situation has become increasingly relevant. To address some of the imbalance, current work procedures within libraries are spotlighting the often antiquated practices of subject classification; including the problem of inadequate mainstream vocabularies for describing LGBTQ+ resources (Princeton Library, 2022; Fischer, 2023). Efforts to highlight and improve this inequity include the addition of alternative vocabularies as enhancements to bibliographic

records. One such vocabulary, which seeks to offer a more inclusive way to catalogue and classify LGBTQ+ materials, is the Homosaurus.

A Brief History of LGBTQ+ Classification

The United States Library of Congress (LC) created its subject heading and classification system in 1897 based on the principle of literary warrant. For most of the 1900s, LC derived literary warrant solely from the terminology appearing in its own collection (Greenblatt, 2011). Consequently, the initial Library of Congress subject headings' list reflected prevailing biases present in LC's materials, ultimately centring Western, white, male, cisgender, and heteronormative perspectives. The 1970s saw the tentative beginnings of a push against this status quo. One of the more influential criticisms was Sanford Berman's 1971 offering: *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Headings Concerning People*. Following the publication of this tract, Berman and his Hennepin County library colleagues created local headings pertaining to various topics, including sexuality. Eventually, some of these innovative terms were incorporated into the LC lists (Johnson, 2007). However, the intervening years have not resolved all problems or lessened the offences of subpar LGBTQ+ resource description. In 2011, Greenblatt noted that the LC heading *Gays* was an umbrella term encompassing gay men and lesbians. This, she suggested, was doubly problematic. As well as being ambiguous for users, it had the secondary effect of contributing to the issue of lesbian erasure.

Furthermore, when assigning terms related to LGBTQ+ communities, LC's subject headings were regularly derived from psychological and medical sources. This type of literature tended to link marginalised sexual and gender identities with perversion and fetishes. Choosing to mirror terminology derived from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* meant that terms such as *Homosexuality* were historically arranged under *Sexual perversion* and *Sexual deviation* in the LC hierarchy (Henry, Kauffman, & Chiu, 2022).

While the LC lists do contain some LGBTQ+ terms, their offerings can feel limited. The heading *Gender-nonconforming people*, for example, can be useful in some cases, but present LC guidance suggests that this heading be used in place of terms like "Gender-variant people," "Genderqueer people," and "Nonbinary people." This dynamic results in the description *Gender-nonconforming people* representing vast swathes of gender experiences without regard for self-identification or culturally specific contexts (The Trans Metadata Collective, 2023). In contrast, there are terms used by LGBTQ+ communities which may be more appropriate. Over the years, cataloguers have sought to overcome gaps left by inadequate LC-created terminology for LGBTQ+ experiences, and the Homosaurus is one way to bridge this divide.

The Homosaurus

The Homosaurus (https://homosaurus.org) is an international linked data vocabulary of LGBTQ+ terms. It was initially created by IHLIA LGBTI Heritage[1] as a standalone list to describe their collection. The Homosaurus definition of LGBTQ+ includes "lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, transgender people, and queer people, as well as intersex people, Two-Spirit people, asexual people, aromantic people, and other people whose gender identity, sexual identity, and/or sexual practices have been marginalized or minoritized by society or have otherwise historically experienced prejudicial exclusion" (Homosaurus, 2023).

Since its inception, the Homosaurus has been restructured and expanded. While work to make the subject terms incorporated by LC less biased has long been spearheaded by advocates such as Berman (Henry, Kauffman & Chiu, 2022), the creaky wheels of library bureaucracy move slowly. In direct contrast, the vocabulary provided by the Homosaurus has been carefully curated to support thoughtful subject analysis of LGBTQ+ materials, to offer better representation of LGBTQ+ topics, and to ensure that the vocabulary used in cataloguing reflects the current language of LGBTQ+ communities. Notably, while LC must justify adding or revising subject headings through literary warrant, the Homosaurus edits its vocabulary in response to evolving terminology. In addition to adding new headings as they gain currency, the Homosaurus solicits feedback and encourages collaborative term development between its editorial board, cataloguers, and the public. These crucial differences enable the Homosaurus to be an agent of change for equality and inclusion.

The Homosaurus at Emory

In an effort to make resources more discoverable and representative for their library users, Emory University's Robert W. Woodruff Library began the process of implementing the Homosaurus into its catalogue in 2021. Adopting the Homosaurus offers the Emory library community many benefits; including increasing the visibility of LGBTQ+ resources through the addition of more specific and inclusive subject headings, improving the research process by allowing library users to search for materials with terms that are relevant and preferred by LGBTQ+ communities, and facilitating searches that describe specific LGBTQ+ groups, subcultures, and identities that are not meaningfully represented by LC subject headings. Perhaps, most importantly, implementing the Homosaurus at Emory sends a message of inclusion to library users. As Hutchinson and Nakatomi point out, "while subject headings are intended to provide consistent subject access to resources of similar content, use of subject headings—whether intentionally or not—may reflect the cataloguer's personal values and beliefs, as well as the values of the era in which they create catalog records" (Hutchinson & Nakatomi, 2023, p. 382). Using the Homosaurus, a vocabulary that is developed and maintained by LGBTQ+ community members, communicates Emory Libraries' intention to respect LGBTQ+ voices in its catalogue.

[1] https://ihlia.nl/en

However, this critical work is not without its challenges. As Tanaka, Michael, and Slutskaya point out, "a significant issue with integration is scale: using the Homosaurus to enhance bibliographic description has the potential to affect thousands—even millions—of records. Given this scale, employing automation to systematically enhance descriptions is appealing since it can update records quickly and efficiently" (Tanaka, Michael & Slutskaya, 2024, p. 1). Therefore, the first step of implementing the Homosaurus at Emory involved collaborating with a library vendor, Backstage Library Works, to create an automated crosswalk mapping Homosaurus terms onto existing LC headings in their records. Beyond creating one-to-one matches between the two vocabularies, the Backstage crosswalk added broader Homosaurus terms which serve to establish additional access points for LGBTQ+ discovery. For example, an LC subject string like *Transgender athletes–Fiction* does not only trigger the addition of the Homosaurus term *Transgender athletes* but also the terms *LGBTQ+ athletes*, *Transgender fiction*, and *LGBTQ+ fiction*. In many cases, the crosswalk also supplements inadequate LC terminology with better-suited Homosaurus terms, and headings like *Sexual minorities* trigger more inclusive language, such as *LGBTQ+ people*.

Since this initial integration, Backstage continues to supplement LC headings with Homosaurus vocabulary on an ongoing basis. However, while automation does augment inclusive cataloguing efforts, it is neither foolproof nor a replacement for manual enhancement. To this end, Emory community members—which includes staff, interns, and students—have been continuously refining the Homosaurus crosswalk; executing cleanup projects, and conducting targeted bibliographic enrichment to overcome gaps in LGBTQ+ resource description. To streamline and support these efforts, specific policies outlining when and how to use Homosaurus terms have been created. The policies cover issues such as self-identification, historical terms and slurs, racial and ethnic identities, and colloquial language (Emory Libraries, 2024). As well as offering guidance, these policies ensure that Emory cataloguers provide a consistent approach to bibliographic maintenance. Patrons and staff are invited to submit harmful language reports via the public-facing library page when they encounter terminology considered offensive or incorrect (Emory Libraries, 2024).

Current Political Climate in the United States

In the United States in 2025, the Homosaurus, along with other inclusive metadata initiatives, is more crucial than ever. Since January, a series of executive orders has been issued by the White House, using charged language purporting to end "gender ideology extremism" and defend the "biological reality of sex" (The White House, 2025). While the impact of these orders is ongoing, evolving, and yet to be fully understood, the current administration's intent to impinge upon the rights and protections of trans, gender diverse, and intersex people is clear. Notably, Executive Order number 14168, specifies that the United States will recognise only two genders, effectively throwing into question whether people existing outside of cisgender frameworks will maintain access to healthcare, civil protections, and accurate legal identity documentation (Cohen & Piper, 2025). Even more concerning is the removal of

online information related to LGBTQ+ communities. The National Park Service, for example, has removed the "T" and the "Q" from the LGBTQ+ acronym on the official Stonewall Monument website, a resource which had previously paid homage to the specifically trans-led struggle of the Stonewall Riots (Sim, 2025). Coupled with threatening guidelines released by the United States Office of Personnel Management instructing federal agency heads to take measures to, "end federal funding of gender ideology," (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2025) many other government websites have also expunged information relating to trans, gender diverse, and intersex people. These measures demonstrate an effort, unprecedented in the United States in recent times, to systematically erase federal recognition of previously protected minority groups.

While a full discussion of civil rights developments pertaining to LGBTQ+ communities in the United States is beyond the scope of this paper, the authors feel that this ongoing situation demands recognition when considering the urgency of inclusive metadata initiatives such as the Homosaurus.

Conclusion

In addition to improving LGBTQ+ discovery, inclusive cataloguing efforts such as the Homosaurus are part of a larger battle to respect the legitimacy and humanity of LGBTQ+ experiences. Libraries must take seriously the reality that, "queer and trans pasts are mediated by the information infrastructures that organize, describe, and construct those pasts to make them accessible to users" (Cifor & Rawson, 2022, pp. 2168-2169). Reflecting on the history of Library of Congress subject headings, it is clear that LGBTQ+ resource description has often reflected the prejudices of society at large. This, in turn, renders the catalogue a frequent site of misrepresentation, if not outright indictment, for LGBTQ+ communities.

Unfortunately, the conflict over accurate and inclusive LGBTQ+ resource description is ongoing. Recent campaigns in the United States targeting trans, gender diverse, and intersex people's access to healthcare and public life with a specific focus on erasing LGBTQ+ representation in federal history and health documentation demonstrate the urgency of establishing frameworks for accurate metadata. Accepting that the catalogue is not, and has never been, a neutral or objective space, it is then the responsibility of cataloguers and information professionals at large to correct what Cifor & Rawson (2022) refer to as, "a fundamental failure of information institutions' missions to connect users and information" (p. 2169) when it comes to LGBTQ+ resource description.

Emory Libraries' implementation of the Homosaurus is an imperfect but valuable step towards addressing the problem of inadequate subject terminology in LGBTQ+ cataloguing. The reality of working with a sizable collection is that changing metadata on such a large scale is technically challenging and labour-intensive. Automation might be one key but, as Tanaka, Michael, & Slutskaya (2024) point out, "additional

ongoing commitment and investment in training, policy development, and user education is essential for sustained, long-term success" (p. 2).

To put a finer point on it, more needs to be done to increase the discoverability of LGBTQ+ materials and address the history and ongoing reality of prejudicial exclusion. Too often, metadata efforts are hidden behind a smokescreen of mysterious complexity. It is the hope of the authors that Emory's work with the Homosaurus will create some well needed illumination and contribute, in a small way, towards a future of more inclusive LGBTQ+ cataloguing.

Author Notes

Tara Kunesh (she/her) is the PINES Bibliographic Services Specialist at the Georgia Public Library Service. She previously worked as a Senior Resource Description Specialist at Emory University.

Jude Romines (he/they) is a Resource Description Specialist with Emory University and a current information sciences candidate at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to tkunesh@georgialibraries.org or jude.romines@emory.edu

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