

Considering the adoption of RBMS prejudicial works genre terms to facilitate the identification of historically prejudiced materials

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ABSTRACT

The article considers the limitations of conventional library cataloguing rules for surfacing and contextualising works with harmful and discriminatory content, using the Heritage Library of the Royal College of Physicians as a case study. It introduces the possibility of using a controlled vocabulary in 655 genre headings as a mean to identify this material, though notes that this is not without difficulties. It introduces a future event to enable cataloguers to discuss these difficulties and find solutions to them.

KEYWORDS critical cataloguing; cataloguing ethics

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Content advisory: this article uses offensive terms for disabled people as part of its discussion of historical medical works.

Starting in summer 2020, Justice, Equity and Anti-Racism group (JEAN) of the Archive, Heritage Library and Museum Services (AMS) team at the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) began reviewing the provenance, content and description of the RCP's heritage collections for evidence of enslavement, colonialism, racism and other forms of discrimination. This review resulted in a detailed internal action plan, summarised for public information and published on the RCP history website ([Royal College of Physicians, 2024](#)).

From a library cataloguing point of view, this has led to an ongoing project of work, which has so far included

- assessing whether any major library donors were involved in the transatlantic slave trade,
- the adoption of the Cataloguing Code of Ethics ([Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee, 2021](#)),
- the review and updating of geographic subject headings to remove out-of-date and colonialist names,

- the addition of a harmful content statement to the library catalogue ([Royal College of Physicians, 2026](#)),
- and the (very much ongoing) review and updating of subject terms taken from LCSH¹ and MeSH².

Working alongside archives and museum professional colleagues throughout this process threw some of the differences between the metadata standards and norms across the three sectors into clear relief. My colleagues have the ready facility to incorporate broad subject tagging across their items and collections into their archive and museum catalogues, using a list of locally-agreed terms and definitions deemed to be of particular relevance and importance to the RCP context. (At present they are using: black history; colonialism and empire; disability; eugenics and scientific racism; mental health; sexuality and gender identity; slavery; war crimes; women's health; and women in medicine.) They are also able to add textual descriptions of topics, people, and events into narrative descriptive fields in their catalogues as part of standard practice. For example we agreed a standard text to append to materials relating to: Dutch East India Company; East India Company; eugenics; museums and collections as tools of colonialism; physiognomy; scientific polygenism; trade and early modern apothecaries.

The tags were added both to alert users to the potentially sensitive content of records or objects, and also to facilitate the retrieval of material relating to topics that have traditionally been harder to uncover. The narrative descriptions provide the opportunity to provide necessary context for the content of materials that are potentially offensive and prejudiced owing to the time and place of their creation.

Library cataloguing rules do not allow for this style of tagging, nor - traditionally - for the addition of narrative contextualising information. An exception to this is the recent introduction of subfield \$z, 'Title statement context note', to MARC field 245 ([Library of Congress, 2025a](#); [Library of Congress, 2025b](#)). Cataloguing rules require the cataloguer simply to transcribe an item's title as it appears in print, which may (especially in historical medical collections) include offensive language that goes otherwise completely unremarked upon in the record. Conversely, the transcription of a title and the addition of standard subject headings can leave the true nature of offensive or prejudicial contents obscure to any potential reader. For example, a work such as *Some observations on the mental state of the blind, and deaf, and dumb* by Richard Fowler (1843) appears in the catalogue unremarked on despite this being a now offensive phrase for nonspeaking deaf people, and *A treatise on tropical diseases, on military operations, and on the climate of the West Indies* by Benjamin Moseley (1789) will not reveal that it contains extensive descriptions of the supposed disease-resistance of enslaved Black people, an important pillar of developing theories of scientific racism.

¹ <https://www.loc.gov/aba/cataloging/subject/>

² <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/meshhome.html>

I have therefore been considering what might be possible within the framework of library cataloguing standards to provide more equitable, informative and accurate subject description of texts in the RCP Heritage Library. In particular I have been considering a specific sub-section of genre headings maintained by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries of the America Library Association (RBMS).

The MARC 21 655 field, 'Index Term-Genre/Form' (commonly referred to as a genre heading) can be used to add terms "indicating the genre, form, and/or physical characteristics of the materials being described" to a bibliographic record ([Library of Congress, 2022](#)). Terms are to be taken from standard published lists as identified by the second indicator (for six of the most common sources) or from other sources identified in subfield \$2 using the relevant code from the appropriate Library of Congress source codes list ([Library of Congress, 2026](#)).

In rare books cataloguing the 655 is used by some (though not all) institutions as a means to apply a controlled vocabulary to the description of copy specific information (provenance, bindings, quirks of production, etc.) by applying terms from the controlled vocabulary maintained by the RBMS. This scheme - the RBMS Controlled Vocabulary for Rare Materials Cataloguing (RBMS CVRMC) - was previously a collection of six vocabularies known as the RBMS Controlled Vocabularies, which were merged together and relaunched as the RBMS CVRMC in March 2023 ([RBMS Controlled Vocabularies Editorial Group, 2025](#); [Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, 2024](#)).

As well as containing terms relating to the physical features of rare books, the RBMS CVRMC also contains hierarchically-organised genre terms, nested within its 'Works' subsection. These include commonly understood genres such as 'Bibliographies' or 'Cookbooks' as well as more specialised terms used for historical works of various periods such as 'Mazarinades' or 'Samizdat'.

Under the 'Content of work' subheading are 32 terms designed specifically for describing prejudicial works, defined as material that "exhibits hostility toward or bias against people because of their disability, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, gender identity" ([RBMS Controlled Vocabularies Editorial Group, 2025](#)). These terms are the product of a four-year project convened in 2020 to review and revise existing terms and to generate new terminology ([RBMS Controlled Vocabularies Editorial Group, 2024](#)). They are different in their nature as they explicitly confront the supposed 'neutrality' of the catalogue by providing the means explicitly to highlight the directly harmful nature of works. The terms include some that relate to general species of oppression, schools of thought, and societal movements - 'Ableist works', 'Misogynistic works', 'Anti-LGBTQ+ works' and others - and those that relate to specific expressions of prejudice such as 'Blackface minstrel songs'.

In the report that accompanied the publication of the revised terms, the RBMS working group hoped that the use of these terms would both facilitate the study of

systems and structures of oppression, and that they would help libraries and collections not to contribute to or mask harm by "by failing to surface the essential nature of library resources" ([RBMS Controlled Vocabularies Editorial Group, 2024](#), p. 1). These two concerns map closely onto the drivers of the ongoing work at the RCP.

Since the publication of the RBMS working group report, I have been considering how these genre headings for prejudicial works can be applied to the library collections for which I am responsible. The Heritage Library collection contains approximately 50,000 titles, dating from the advent of printing in the 15th century to the present day. Though the subject coverage of the collection is wide and encompasses far more than the medical sciences, the history of medicine is necessarily a core part of its identity. In considering how potentially to apply the RBMS prejudicial works terms to this collection I have faced indecision based on the very nature of history of medicine collections. Given that so much of medical science (especially of the 19th and 20th century) has been predicated on discriminatory theories and perceptions including misogyny, ableism, racist beliefs and eugenics, how can such terms be *usefully* applied to our collections? In wanting to exercise a duty of care by adding a term alerting readers to the fact that a given work 'exhibit[s] hostility toward or bias against peoples or cultures racialized as other by the dominant group or culture of a specific place or time' ([Racist works, 2024](#)), does that labelling become meaningless if every similar work from a broad swathe of time is similarly labelled?

In order to explore this issue further, and hopefully to seek a practical and helpful way forward, I am working with CILIP's Metadata & Discovery Group and Rare Books and Special Collections Group to hold a discussion event later in the year. Watch the usual channels for more information in due course.

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