Metadata &
Discovery
Group

Drinking coffee and saving the world
reflections on MDG subject analysis World Cafe in London

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ABSTRACT

This article summarises the outcomes of MDG's first subject analysis World Cafe event in London, organised in response to the controversial changes to the Library of Congress Subject Headings for Mount Denali and the Gulf of Mexico in February 2025 and the ethical challenges these changes pose for users of LCSH.

On the 18th of February 2025 the Library of Congress circulated *Tentative monthly list 12 LCSH 2 (February 13, 2025)*[1] of changes to Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) (Library of Congress, 2025). This came with a "consultation" on these tentative changes closing the same day (Library of Congress, 2025). They allowed half a day or about 12 hours to gather feedback about these changes. Depending on one's time zone this timeframe may not even have been within regular working hours but overnight. The next day it was announced that the changes would take place (Cannan, 2025 and Fox, 2025). The changes proposed in this tentative document were around the naming of the Gulf of Mexico and Mount Denali. LoC changed every heading referring to the Gulf of Mexico and Mount Denali to reflect the Presidential Executive Order "Restoring names that honor American greatness". A change in the authority file that is now reflected in every catalogue across the world that relies on the LCSH authority file.

This change and the manner in which it was enacted caused consternation across the library sector both here in the UK and aboard. The email listservs lit up with responses ranging from anger and outrage to indifference. As chair of MDG I had many emails from around the UK and from Canada, Australia and New Zealand expressing real concern about the ability of the US executive to make changes to library catalogues across the world at a whim. This change to LCSH is only the latest

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[1] The list was backdated to the 13th of February. Perusal of the pertinent mailing lists (e.g. PCC Discussion list (https://listserv.loc.gov/archives/pcclist.html), AUTOCAT (Tomaras, 2025)) shows that it was not shared with the community before the 18th February.

example of the Library of Congress making decisions on the basis of the US executive. In 2019, the excellent documentary "Change the subject" by Jill Baron and Sawyer Broadley exposed a similar contention around language used to describe undocumented persons in the United States (Change the subject, 2019).

MDG responds

Over the following months MDG needed to formulate a response to this change by the Library of Congress. I consulted with colleagues across the globe and within the sector in the UK about what could be done. It was agreed by many that short term technical fixes could be applied within discovery layers where technical expertise and will exist. However, there was no larger sector discussion about the overall ethics or responsibility of the library communities towards subject analysis nor any obvious, viable, scalable solutions that could be implemented quickly and effectively. In light of this, MDG proposed to host a series of WorldCafe workshops to discuss all the issues raised and to propose a solution moving forward.

The World Café method

The world café method is a simple style of event that is designed to bring together sector experts and solve difficult problems. The methodology (The World Café Community Foundation, no date) boils down to 5 basic parts:

1. a space that is comfortable and full of coffee
2. an introduction to the topic
3. small group rounds at each table tackling one topic area
4. questions designed to promote discussion and seek answers
5. harvesting the data generated at each table afterwards

Afterwards, a plenary may be conducted where the issues are discussed and the main points drawn out by the various tables and participants.

On subject analysis

With the method in place, we decided to run the first of a series of these in London at the Wellcome Collection on the 26th November 2025. Since there were so many topics to consider and areas to cover, we consolidated the World Café programme to 6 overarching themes. These were:

1. sector-wide implications of LCSH as a subject index
2. principles of an alternative system
3. the technical and financial issues around temporary or long-term solutions
4. scalable alternatives to LCSH
5. partnerships with sector bodies
6. what next?

Each of these topic areas had a number of seed questions (see Appendix 1) to begin the conversations and stimulate discussions around the table. Each participant at the event then had 25 minutes per table to discuss each topic area with other participants and draw up some ideas on flip-charts. At the end of the sixth session, we held a brief plenary session before wrapping up.

Overview of the day

Overall, the energy in the room was vibrant and engaging with all the tables being active and energised throughout. We generated 6 flipcharts per topic and each of these captured a whole range of ideas to carry forward. In general, there was widespread agreement that something needed to be done and that achievable goals should be set around enhancements and supplements rather than wholesale replacement. The main theme to arise was the feeling that we needed to create a community-led, ethical framework that could be used in a linked data environment.

The main findings of each of the topic areas were summarised in a report following the meeting. I will replicate these here for wider sector discussion.

Question 1: Sector-wide implications of LCSH as a subject index

The pros of using LCSH:

- efficiency
- consistency
- widespread adoption
- supplier availability
- open
- large percentage of terms are ok
- VIAF/LC classification links

The cons of using LCSH:

- US/Anglo-centrism
- slow to change
- inflexibility
- language not inclusive
- limited local control
- single point of failure

Context fit: Adequate for broad Anglophone academic content but weaker for specialist, public, juvenile, and local history.

Ethics: There was some discussion about the onus of responsibility for discoverability. How much falls to the user and how much falls to librarians? There was

agreement that some responsibility lies with the user, but how we describe the bibliographic world is still vital. There are ubiquitous concerns about political interference in library indexes, but also acknowledgement that the act of cataloguing is not neutral.

Some ideas:

- create an inventory of problematic terms to feed into front-end display substitutions
- create mappings from current LCSH to preferred UK labels and domain thesauri
- reate workflows based on linked data

Question 2: Principles of alternative system

Principles:

- fit for purpose (discoverability)
- equitable/EDI
- consistent
- community-driven
- open
- non-commercial
- agile
- professional integrity
- fair compensation to those involved

Users:

- librarians
- end-users (public, academic, specialist, corporate etc)
- domain experts

Scope:

- needs to be MARC compatible
- LMS integration with discovery layers
- linked data integration (Wikidata)
- allow optional uncontrolled tagging to compliment controlled headings

Recommendations:

- a published principles manifesto/charter/declaration to give overarching direction
- create an editorial policy to ensure transparency alongside an accountability board

Question 3. The technical and financial issues around temporary or long-term solutions

Finance:

- massive sector constraints on UKHEIs and many sector bodies in CILIP and Jisc
- all community led work has costs (often hidden) such as pro bono labour, time given by institutions for staff etc.
- the project will need long-term sustainable finance beyond project funding
- the project should avoid any involvement of corporate interests seeking to monetise the work
- technical solutions need to be affordable but will take time to create (which costs) and time to develop (more costs) before they can be stabilised (which will need long term funds)

Technical:

- open and interoperable
- API-driven
- linked data for local variation
- Wikidata and Wikimedia infrastructure already exist and could be leveraged
- some limitations imposed by vendor systems and LMS software solutions

Ownership: The ownership of this project should be a partnership agreement with various agencies. It could be CILIP MDG alongside Jisc and BL. We propose that the MDG committee creates a permanent governance board with a liaison to the committee and each of the coalition partners.

Recommendations: Considering the discussions these are some of the things that could be explored by the community:

- create a low-tech barrier, machine-readable list (compatible with MARC if necessary)
- create a low barrier API service to query this list
- map concepts to Wikidata.
- could we get a consortium funded post for editorial and/or technical roles?

Question 4: Scalable alternatives to LCSH

There is no single scalable alternative to LCSH. FAST[2] is bound up with LC and is controlled by OCLC. There are governance issues to consider if FAST is set to become the standard to build a new scheme. Some subject specific schemes are available such as Homosaurus. There are industry standards such as UKSLC[3] and BIC Thema[4].

We could create a UK supplement to LCSH that translates headings for normalisation in discovery layers. It could be the work of a task and finish group to identify sets of problem areas and propose alternative locally relevant headings. Would we need to consider creating MARC records? How would these port into current ILSs? What linked data options are available that are low tech, scalable and reliable?

Recommendations:

- create priority list areas for targeted approach and look to current practice in this area e.g. Carissa Chew's Inclusive Terminology Glossary[5]
- create a central register of local alternative headings
- generate authority records? In MARC?
- do user experience testing with records before and after
- present results to IFLA 2027?

Question 5: Partnerships with sector bodies

Primary partners:

- CILIP
- RLUK
- SCONUL
- Jisc
- national libraries
- Wikidata UK
- consortia, e.g. ALN, WHELF, M25, Mercian
- community groups
- vendors, e.g. OCLC, Ebsco, BDS, Clarivate

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[2] https://www.oclc.org/research/areas/data-science/fast.html
[3] UK Standard Library Categories Scheme, https://bic.org.uk/resources/uk-standard-library-categories/
[4] https://bic.org.uk/resources/thema/
[5] https://culturalheritageterminology.co.uk/glossary/

Boundaries:

- politically agnostic and free from direct or indirect political interference
- independent editorial control must be maintained
- do no allow commercialisation or monopoly interests to dominate the work

Recommendations:

- convene a Subject Index Steering Committee under CILIP MDG
- create working groups to undertake specific tasks (subject domains, technical working group)
- use domain task and finish groups to complete specific work and engage with communities
- create vendor memoranda of understanding
- partner with Wikidata formally

Question 6. What next?

Create working groups.

Purpose:

- build connections with community of practice
- general advocacy with the sector
- build technical capacity
- conduct UX testing
- look at systems and solutions e.g. Alma group, OCLC group etc.
- look at the role of AI
- we need to make sure that these groups are representative of the UK

Immediate steps:

- (1-6 weeks) Publish London report and Charter?
- January: Organise follow up sessions in Cardiff, Liverpool and Scotland. Plan activities to coincide with additional WorldCafe events. Ensure participants get a view of previous work to build on London beginnings
- (Feb-April) Form steering committee and commission technical working parties
- (April-May): Create two pilot projects as alternative headings in focused subject domains e.g. race and sexuality
- (May-Sep): Pilot API/linked solution with subset of new terms created in one or more library systems
- (Sep-Dec): Continue working groups. UX testing

- 2027: Expand project to more areas. Present initial results to IFLA 2027, particularly the intellectual work
- Build resilience in the system by exploring long-term funding options and sector wide buy-in

Concluding remarks

The overall success of the day has initiated the planning of more World Café events to be held this year. Already planned are events in Cardiff on 21st April 2026[6] and Liverpool on the 29th April 2026[7]. It is anticipated that these events will build on the work already done in London and start to build the coalition of the interested that will carry this work forward. As chair of MDG I encourage anyone interested in this work to attend the events if they can or contact me at chair.mdg@cilip.org.uk to be included. We have created a Teams space to collaborate and will be forming working groups very soon. This work should be front and centre of metadata advocacy across the sector and before the eyes our directors and library leaders. Now is the time for change, now is the time to save the world.

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[6] https://www.cilip.org.uk/events/EventDetails.aspx?id=2046160&group=201298
[7] https://www.cilip.org.uk/events/EventDetails.aspx?id=2048521&group=201298

Appendix 1: Seed questions for each topic

Each topic came with a series of seed questions to get the conversations running. Here are the questions asked at each topic table.

Question 1: Sector-wide implications of LCSH as a subject index

1. What does LCSH do within our catalogues?
2. How does it affect our view of the bibliographic universe?
3. How flexible, adaptable, inclusive or appropriate are they?
4. Is it good enough for large English language academic collections?
5. How much does the US-centric or lack of localisation really degrade our descriptions?
6. Are workflow efficiencies from ready-made worth the trade-off?
7. Are they useful in a public library context?
8. Or specialist library or scholarly content context?

Question 2: Principles of alternative system

1. What are the top level principles around which a subject index is built?
2. What is it for?
3. Who are the users?
4. How do we get buy in from interested parties?
5. What would be excluded?
6. To what extent should political considerations be factored into these?
7. How do we remain politically neutral without compromising professional integrity?

Question 3: The technical and financial issues around temporary or long-term solutions

1. What are the technical fixes?
2. Can we put a plaster over subject headings we don't want?
3. Can we flex the current system?
4. Are there linked data solutions?
5. What are the base technological needs?
6. Are there other indexes we want to use?
7. What are the long term implications of setting up a new/rival system?
8. Who will maintain it?
9. How will it be costed?
10. Will it be entirely community led?

Question 4: Scalable alternatives to LCSH

1. What are the viable scalable alternatives to LCSH?
2. How will these be implemented?
3. What systems requirements are involved?
4. Does a new index need to be curated?
5. To what extent should the solution be local, national, or international?
6. Should the index be narrowly constrained or expandable?
7. What is the governance of the alternative systems?
8. What governance should be made around adoption?

Question 5: Partnerships with sector bodies

1. What are the primary partnerships we can form?
2. What are the boundaries that need to be formed?
3. What kind of governance structure ought to be created?
4. How many and what types of relationships should be created?

Question 6: What next?

1. Who are our interested parties?
2. Are there any obvious working groups that could be formed?
3. Are there any task and finish groups that might be of use?
4. Is anyone willing to chair or host these?
5. Do we need a steering committee?
6. What are the timeframes that seem reasonable?
7. Which groups should be approached in what way?