The DEI Metadata Handbook
THE DEI METADATA HANDBOOK

A Guide to Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Description

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Iowa State University Digital Press
Ames, Iowa
Introduction

As cataloguers, we have significant influence over how information resources are represented through the choices we make.

–Cataloguing Code of Ethics

Why DEI metadata?

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are a set of principles adopted by many institutions to foster a welcoming climate where individuals from all backgrounds are treated fairly and have the opportunity to participate fully. Practices based on these principles are commonly referred to as DEI, though they are also known as EDI, DEIA (with an “A” for accessibility), EDIJ or JEDI (with a “J” for justice), EDISJ (with an SJ for “social justice”), and related initialisms. While critics claim that DEI-informed practices are ineffective, burdensome, or discriminatory against conservative viewpoints, advocates maintain that they mitigate discrimination and support historically marginalized groups.

This handbook does not address the effectiveness of DEI initiatives, nor does it contend that any of the strategies discussed within are compulsory. Rather, it proposes that DEI-informed metadata promotes respect for all people who interact with or are described by metadata.

In the context of this book, metadata refers to information about resources collected by libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage institutions. Like DEI practices in general, metadata work with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion has various names, including conscious editing, critical cataloging, descriptive equity, equitable metadata, inclusive description, and reparative resource description. No matter the label, DEI metadata practices share common goals: enhancing diverse representation in descriptive metadata; improving discovery of diverse resources; and mitigating negative effects of inaccurate, outdated, or offensive terminology.

Although DEI is a relatively new initialism, the goals of DEI metadata have decades-old origins. Catalogers have long recognized the importance of representing diverse perspectives in bibliographic metadata. In the 1930s, Catherine Latimer and Dorothy Porter countered the limitations of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) by creating terms for topics important to Black researchers, such as slave insurrections,

passing, and Pan-Africanism. In 1971, Sanford Berman criticized the “prejudices and antipathies” found within the LCSH and called for revising pejorative terms for people. In 2001, Hope A. Olson identified “marginalizations and exclusions” in the library catalog and called on libraries to create space for underrepresented voices in bibliographic information—for example, by allowing multiple authoritative headings for a topic or by subverting traditional classification schemes. In 2008, Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front brought renewed focus to the biases and shortcomings of traditional cataloging and suggested methods for making cataloging more inclusive.

The American Library Association (ALA) included diversity as one of the core values of librarianship in 2004—specifically stating that libraries reflect the nation’s diversity “by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve.” (ALA later folded diversity into a consolidated list of five core values: access, equity, intellectual freedom and privacy, public good, and sustainability.) As libraries cannot provide access to diverse resources without metadata, catalogers and metadata creators play a key role in improving their discovery. Furthermore, as Rachel Ivy Clarke and Sayward Schoonmaker argue, library metadata must not only “enable access to diverse reading materials” but also “promote these materials to wider audiences and enable more transparent dialogic interactions between catalogs and users.”

The ramifications of negative user interactions with library metadata gained attention in the 2010s, during an effort by Dartmouth College students to change the LCSH “Illegal aliens.” Calling the term “dehumanizing, offensive, inflammatory, and even a racial slur,” the ALA Council in 2016 supported its replacement with “Undocumented immigrants.” Although the Library of Congress eventually replaced the heading with “Noncitizens” and “Illegal immigration,” some cataloging and metadata professionals did not wait for the official change; by the end of the decade, they had adopted various strategies to remediate

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the problematic heading in library metadata.13 (See Chapter 5 for more on this issue and subject terms in general.)

The importance of diverse, equitable, and inclusive perspectives in cultural and educational institutions won increased attention during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, particularly after the 2020 protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by police in Minneapolis.14 In the wake of the protests, many libraries and other institutions issued statements condemning racism. Yet statements alone cannot dismantle systemic racism. Instead, as Amelia N. Gibson et al. note, “institutions must commit to action and accountability if they want to make change.”15

In the succeeding years, enough institutions have heeded this call to make critical librarianship (critlib) one of the top trends identified by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL); this theoretical perspective “challenges librarians to take active steps toward antiracist and antioppressive practices” to benefit library users and the profession.16 Occasionally tense discussions in the field have juxtaposed critlib and social justice work against intellectual freedom, particularly the traditionally “neutral” policies of libraries that prohibit censorship or discrimination based on viewpoint. Nevertheless, like diversity, social responsibility and intellectual freedom are both core values of librarianship, and Emily Knox argues that “librarians are looking for practical and actionable methods … that take both values into account.”17

Today, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), ALA, and many libraries worldwide—including Iowa State University Library, publisher of this handbook—have committed to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (https://sdgs.un.org/goals), the tenth of which is “reduced inequalities.”18 Metadata improvement is a practical method for working toward that goal: more inclusive description not only promotes diversity; it also upholds libraries’ mission to “provide meaningful access to information for all.”19

For their part, cataloging and metadata librarians have begun to develop best practices for DEI metadata work. Notably, the Digital Library Federation’s Cultural Assessment Working Group began preparing an inclusive metadata toolkit in 2020; the Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee released the Cataloguing Code of Ethics in 2021; and the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) issued its Guiding Principles for

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Metadata Creation in 2023. This handbook refers to several of these recommendations and guidelines.

At Iowa State University Library, the Metadata Services department has committed itself to establishing thoughtful DEI practices in the metadata it creates and enhances. The authors of this book recognize that we work in a predominantly white profession in predominantly white institutions, and that the resources in our collections and their descriptions have long reflected this hegemony. We have undertaken DEI metadata work out of a shared belief in the importance of the goals stated above, as well as interest in representing our own diverse backgrounds. We understand the logistical challenges of remediating hundreds of thousands of metadata records in our collections, as well as the limitations of our own knowledge and biases. We have attempted outreach to some of the communities we describe, including representatives of several tribal nations and the advisory board for the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR)-funded project Amplifying Black Voices in Iowa, but we have only begun to understand the dedication and cultural humility that this kind of work requires. Nonetheless, we summarize our commitment as follows:

Identities, names, and language are powerful; we will break down bias, cultural misrepresentation, discrimination, and racism through our work. We will describe our resources accurately with regard to culture, gender, and race, using terms that are appropriate and respectful to marginalized communities. We will rely on information readily available within the resources or from the creators. Our work may require revising legacy metadata to overcome past practices, controlled vocabulary limitations, and any implicit bias. We may make mistakes or overlook legacy metadata needing reparative remediation but will strive to remedy these promptly.

**Intended audiences**

Library professionals responsible for creating and managing metadata are the primary audience for this DEI metadata handbook. Additional audiences include, but are not limited to, professionals in other specialties of library and information science, archives, and other information management industries. Examples of these audiences include:

- **Library metadata creators** such as librarians, catalogers, metadata specialists, and any library workers who create and manage metadata.
- **Information professionals** creating resource descriptions or using metadata in their work, such as archivists, museum professionals, researchers, scholars, and data scientists.
- **Educators and students** who teach or take courses in library and information science, archives, and related fields.

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• **DEI professionals** who specialize in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and are responsible for ensuring that metadata is created and managed in a way that promotes these values.

Throughout this handbook, references to professionals encompass members of all these groups.

**Goals of the handbook**

Readers will be able to use this handbook to:

• **Gain a broad awareness** of various DEI-related issues existing in metadata creation and management.
• **Learn techniques** for retroactively reviewing and updating existing metadata to address these issues.
• **Develop strategies** to create metadata that better meets DEI needs.

**Overview of contents**

This handbook may be read cover to cover, but its organization also facilitates skipping to chapters that are relevant to your work or interests. Each chapter focuses on a particular area of metadata work, detailing different ethical considerations and approaches. Each chapter includes examples and use cases related to its topic.

• **Chapter 1** covers inclusive description practices in free-text or uncontrolled elements, including titles and summaries. It outlines fundamental principles of inclusive description—relevance, users’ needs, accuracy, and respect—and offers tips for describing identities and determining which form of a name to use. The chapter concludes with strategies for handling cases where outdated or problematic language persists in metadata, including redaction, annotation, harmful language statements, and special genre terms.
• **Chapter 2** discusses various ethical considerations around name authorities, including privacy concerns surrounding birth dates, pseudonyms and anonymity, gender, and transgender names. It also acknowledges the complexity of determining the preferred forms of non-English names, including transliteration, spelling, and cultural considerations.
• **Chapter 3** explores the use of demographic group headings to describe people or groups. It covers why one may use such headings, what to consider before using them, vocabulary options, and how they can be incorporated into MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloging) and non-MARC metadata.
• **Chapter 4** describes issues regarding classification, particularly the historical origins of biases in the Library of Congress and Dewey Decimal classifications. Case studies illustrate two ways to address these biases: keeping current with changes and considering alternative classification systems.
• **Chapter 5** addresses biases that exist in subject headings, with a focus on Library of Congress Subject Headings, and ways to mitigate them. Case studies examine two strategies: changing existing headings through the Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) and adding alternative headings to exiting library metadata. The chapter also includes a list of practical questions to consider before implementing alternative subject headings.
• **Chapter 6** defines accessibility metadata for physical and digital resources. It explores accessibility
metadata in MARC and focuses on the emerging importance of web accessibility, not only for inclusivity but also for legal compliance. Examples illustrate best practices for accessibility metadata, including alt text and extended description for images; audio description, captions, and transcripts for audiovisual resources; optical character recognition (OCR) for digitized text, and language information for digital resources.

**Outreach**

Several sections of the book recommend outreach to described communities as a method for determining preferred terminology. As mentioned above, the authors have reached out to some of the communities we describe. We have had fruitful communications as well as failures to connect. We realize that outreach is not a simple undertaking—it requires planning, resources, and ideally the support of your department or institution. If you work in a larger institution, you may be able to consult with communication specialists, DEI offices, or affinity associations for ideas and advice. Resources geared toward community engagement also can provide ideas for outreach activities and methods—for example, the open-access *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement* (https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/jloe/) and books such as *Building Community Engagement and Outreach in Libraries* (2022).

Outreach requires a respectful approach that may be described as cultural humility, a concept developed in healthcare, counseling, social work, and education and adopted by some librarians. Cultural humility, which aims to remedy power imbalances in personal interactions, is not an easily obtained skill but a set of ongoing practices that take time and self-reflection. Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend’s introductory article “Cultural Humility in Libraries” and book *Hopeful Visions, Practical Actions: Cultural Humility in Library Work* offer ideas and additional resources. Practical guidelines and templates for email outreach can be found in the PCC Standing Committee on Training’s document “Authority Control FAQs for Catalogers Contacting Creators/Contributors” and Cataloging Lab’s “Best Practices in Authority Work Relating to Indigenous Nations in the U.S.”

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Workload management

Finally, we recognize that metadata professionals’ time is precious. Researching facts or conducting research to verify community preferences can consume much of our time and effort. To avoid becoming overwhelmed, we propose a few strategies for managing DEI metadata work:

1. **Usage statistics.** Through the virtue of circulation or online use, a resource’s importance to library users can indicate the urgency of metadata enhancement, including DEI work. Consider reviewing online usage data or circulation data (loans and in-house counts) to identify and prioritize high-use candidates for review.

2. **Flagging materials.** Consider creating a mechanism to flag materials, either during initial processing or whenever workers encounter them, that could benefit from a later DEI review or that could be referred to a colleague for DEI enhancement. This may be a preferable option for busy department staff tasked with processing many materials with tight deadlines. Materials could be flagged in your library system or tracked in project or task management tools.

3. **Metadata audits.** An audit of existing metadata may be another useful way to identify resources in need of remediation. Audits do not need to be comprehensive! Start by simply searching for a selection of problematic terms in existing metadata to create a list of records for potential remediation. Focus on terms relevant to your users.

4. **User feedback.** Consider a shared email address or online form to collect feedback from users about your catalog and digital repositories. Chapter 1 contains examples of harmful language statements that include instructions for reporting problematic metadata.

However you identify resources for DEI work, track their titles and identifiers on a task management board (e.g., Trello or Jira), a shared document (such as an Excel workbook or Google Sheet), or a combination of these methods. Staff can then reference these lists during enhancement or remediation projects or during slower periods of the year.

We recognize that the lack of a single DEI standard to follow is challenging, and the amount of reparative work to be done may seem infinite. Nevertheless, as archivist Dorothy Berry reminds those who undertake DEI metadata work, “Perfection is not the goal. Progress is the goal.”

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29. Dorothy Berry, “Conscious Editing: Enhancing Diversity and Discovery” (webinar, Sunshine State Digital Network Introduction to Conscious Editing Series, October 7, 2020), [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nOKbyU3K-nn2Y4GNh0O196KD8d-ZOAeN/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nOKbyU3K-nn2Y4GNh0O196KD8d-ZOAeN/view).