

# The Search That Dare Not Speak Its Name: LGBT Information and Catalog Records

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## Introduction

Although the United States of America does not have an official national library, our Library of Congress acts as one. As such, the policies and procedures of the Library of Congress influence not only libraries across the country, but across the world. While the goal of the Library of Congress, and thus libraries in our country, is to be objective and neutral, certain biases evolve.

In 1971, librarian and cataloger Sanford Berman published an influential text concerning bias in the Library of Congress Subject Headings. This book, titled *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*, examines how subject headings show bias against people who are not white, not men, not straight, not Christian, etc.

Since 1971, many changes have been made regarding LGBT subject headings. But much work is left to be done, and LGBT materials and information are still hard to locate in OPACs.

## Themes and Keywords

- Bias in Library of Congress Subject Headings
- Controlled Vocabulary vs. Natural Language
- Classification and Power
- Underserved Communities
- Information Organization and Access
- Information Seeking Behavior
- Ethics of Information Organization
- Radical Cataloging
- Progressive Librarianship
- Diversity in Library and Information Science

## Selected Bibliography



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- Berman, Sanford. 1993. *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.,
- Drabinski, Emily. 2013. "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 83 (2): 94–111. doi:10.1086/669547.

More at <http://bit.ly/1RD1itQ>

## Findings

### Controlled Vocabulary vs. Natural Language

Library of Congress Subject Headings are a great way to collocate resources, but sometimes they do not reflect the language patrons use to search, especially in keyword searches.

- "Sexual minorities" / "LGBT"
- "Transsexuals" / "Transgender"
- Identities as plural nouns / Identities as singular adjectives
- Absence of popular identities, e.g. queer

Besides a title or author search, the most common type of search in an OPAC is a keyword search, not a subject search. Keyword searches are great because they search an entire record, including subject terms. But if those keywords exist nowhere in a record, the information the patron is looking for will not be found. This is especially a problem for LGBT people who often use libraries to seek information about their identities.

[LGBT people](#) USE [Sexual minorities](#)

[LGBT pride celebrations](#) USE [Gay pride celebrations](#)

[LGBT Pride Day](#) USE [Gay Pride Day](#)

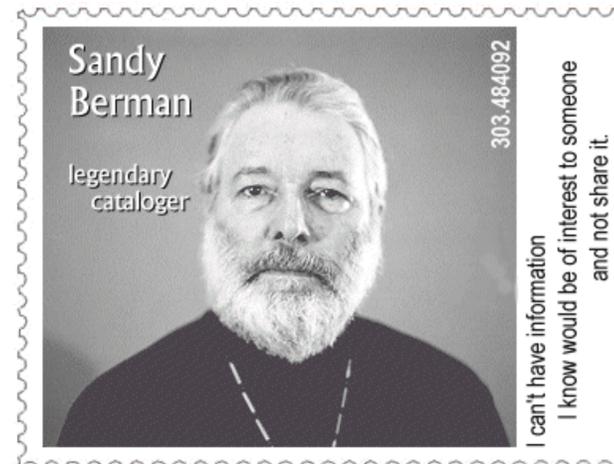
[LGBT pride parades](#) USE [Gay pride parades](#)

[LGBTQ people](#) USE [Sexual minorities](#)

This is a screenshot I took on October 27, 2015 inside of Classification Web (a tool for viewing LC Subject Headings). I just did a simple search for "LGBT," an acronym which has been in popular use by the gay community and the public at large for years.

What is meant by "sexual minorities?" What other identities could be included in that? How is this a problem?

What is the reasoning behind using "Gay" as an umbrella term?



Art by Jessamyn West

## Solutions

### Incorporation

One solution to improving findability is to incorporate natural language into catalog records. Libraries can do this in several ways:

- Allow users to add tags
- LibraryThing allows libraries to import folksonomies into their OPACs
- Rich records including summary notes and Table of Contents notes
- Change the subject headings to reflect natural language

While these suggestions from scholars and librarians all seem doable and sound, there still remains problems. Because these subject headings deal with identities and groups of people, they are always already out of date. For folksonomies and tagging, users who are not trained will often not supply descriptive tags and will instead offer tags like "to read."

Scholar Emily Drabinski also suggests that it is counterproductive to try to "fix" subject headings. She is coming from a Queer Theory point of view, where identity is fluid and complicated. The act of trying to accurately classify an identity, especially a queer identity, is pointless. She instead encourages librarians to teach users to engage critically with catalog records.

## Why is this Important?

Improving subject headings for LGBT materials is beneficial for several reasons:

- Improved access
- Shaping societal attitudes
- Correct "aboutness"

But these same reasons should also be applied to other underserved communities and oppressed groups, as well as materials in general!

Improved access, rich cataloging and classification, and socially conscious service are helpful for all materials.

"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral." –Paulo Freire

## Conclusions

Because LCSH come from a particular society, they show the biases of that society and the power imbalances inherent in the system.

This bias actively harms oppressed groups like the LGBT community by enforcing societal attitudes and also by restricting access to information.

As librarians, we should strive to enhance access to LGBT information by continuing the work of people like Sanford Berman and improving subject analysis in catalog records.