
Library of Congress Subject Headings are used in library catalogs as a way of providing uniformity that improves access to materials. This project was geared toward improving access to the collection of a specialized library – University of North Carolina’s Park Library in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. With a focus on applying supplemental terms that would benefit keyword searching, subject headings were applied to 215 undergraduate honors theses. Observations are also made concerning the problems inherent to controlled vocabularies, such as bias.

Headings:

Subject headings, Library of Congress

Subject cataloging

Classification
ACCESS ENHANCED: IMPROVING DISCOVERABILITY THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT HEADINGS

by
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I. Introduction

Controlled vocabularies provide uniformity across library catalogs. This leads to predictability and precision in information searching. The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) is a controlled vocabulary of authoritative terms that uses cross referencing to connect related terms. This type of system provides multiple points of access that help users find material.

But how does the absence of such a system affect access? This was the case at University of North Carolina’s Park Library in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. A majority of some 1,000 student theses and dissertations lack subject headings, limiting description of the works and reducing the likelihood that users can easily find materials of interest. My goal for this project was to apply subject headings to the undergraduate honors theses housed at Park Library, as these are the most requested of the student papers. Taking an approach focusing on the application of headings relevant to the user base of the school, the hope is that patrons will now have more success in retrieving theses when searching for keywords.

I will detail the decisions that affected the methodology for applying subject headings to the collection. Also, I aim to show both positive and negative aspects of LCSH through a literature review and my own observations.
II. Literature Review

1. A brief history of Library of Congress Subject Headings

Library of Congress officials had to decide how to organize its collection after moving from the Capitol to its new building in 1897. They decided to establish a new classification system and adopt the dictionary form for the main catalog. In 1898, the conversion was made from an author catalog to a dictionary catalog. This incorporated author, title and subject entries into a single file. In 1902, amid requests for more standardization, a market formed for the Library of Congress’ card distribution service. “The Library's move to such a catalog, along with its practice of distributing its printed cards, put the institution at the forefront of American cataloging policy and practice” (Chan, 1998). This was when subject headings controlled by the Library of Congress began to be used. 1909 saw the first printing of what would eventually be referred to as Library of Congress Subject Headings.

Charles Ammi Cutter’s guidelines for subject access played a major role in shaping LCSH. However, LCSH did not acknowledge Cutter’s influence for quite some time. As Stone (2000) says:

A textbook on cataloging published in 1963 attested that “nothing has been written since that is any clearer than Mr. Cutter’s explanation of this aspect of cataloging.” Certainly, we are indebted to Cutter for the concepts of direct entry, the use of natural language, and the syndetic structure (cross-references) meant to compensate for the “scattering” of related topics in the dictionary catalog. And yet, the influence of Cutter on the LCSH was not acknowledged by the Library of Congress until 1972. (p. 3)
Stone found that the Library of Congress adopted a more pragmatic approach than what Cutter had intended. This resulted in inconsistencies in the forms of subject headings and the choice of cross-references and inverted headings – used to logically group subjects – were more prominent than Cutter had recommended.

LCM was developed for in-house use at the Library of Congress, but was considered appropriate for the largest public libraries, some colleges and university libraries. Smaller libraries used the American Library Association’s List of Subject Headings for Use in Dictionary Catalogs and, eventually, the Sears List of Subject Headings.

From the beginning, LCSH faced criticism for the inverted and subdivided headings. In the 1920s and 1930s, Stone says, LCSH lacked some of the syndetic structure found in ALA or in Sears. “It was not until 4th LCSH (1943) that ‘refer from’ references were included, in addition to the ‘see’ and ‘see also’ cross-references, but printed in a separate volume; the 5th LCSH (1948) incorporated the ‘refer from’ references in the main list” (p. 3).

By the 1930s, more libraries were doing retrospective conversion to LCSH “for several compelling reasons: as their library collections grew, the desire for more precise subject headings increased; it was no longer economically feasible to continually revise subject headings appearing on LC catalog cards; and, the LCSH was the only general list that made a consistent practice of keeping up to date by creating new subject headings for new topics” (Stone, p. 4).

Around the 1950s, libraries grew dissatisfied with LCSH because they wanted to improve subject access while reducing the cost of subject cataloging saying, “The basic
rules and techniques for the construction of subject catalogs and the development of subject heading lists have undergone virtually no change in the last 75 years” (Stone, p. 4). There was also a move to the divided catalog around this time period, which some librarians worried would reduce access. Some libraries started experimenting with automation in order to address access problems. New techniques and experiments proved to be useful, but it was determined they were better as supplements rather than replacements to LCSH.

2. The good

One of the primary benefits of controlled vocabularies like LCSH is the access they provide to users through the use of specific terms. The specificity of subject headings brings precision to subject searching. Each catalog user will approach a subject search differently. This affects what kinds of terms should be used.

Drabenstott, Simcox & Williams (1999) brought up the ideals of the aforementioned Charles Cutter by saying, “According to Cutter, the most important subject cataloging principle is consideration of the best interest of the catalog user. In the preface to the fourth edition of Rules for a Dictionary Catalog, Cutter stated: ‘The convenience of the public is always to be set before the ease of the cataloger.’”

The authors also discuss how David Judson Haykin, chief of subject cataloging for Library of Congress, interpreted Cutter’s principles regarding readers and quotes Haykin saying, “The reader is the focus in all cataloging principles and practice. All other considerations, such as convenience and the desire to arrange entries in some logical order, are secondary to the basic rule that the heading, in wording and structure, should be that which the reader will seek in the catalog.”
Fina (1993) reinforces Haykin’s ideas on access of the user by saying, “The ways in which a reader would most naturally search for information should be given priority over considerations of convenience to the librarian.”

Chung (2010), through surveys and in-depth interviews with librarians, concluded that “LCSH was very useful for finding other related materials as a subject access point. They found that the use of subject headings gives users a broad overview of a topic. This allows users to gain an understanding of how terms are used in relation to each other.”

Chung’s work ties in with the findings of Marshall (2003), who focused on specificity in subject headings. Marshall discusses the need for different levels of specificity in applied terms in order to compensate for the different approaches and needs of users, which increase subject accessibility. Marshall evaluates the effectiveness of access in terms of recall and precision.

Within any collection of documents, for a particular information need there is a set of items that would help satisfy that need. One subject search may pull up nearly all of these relevant works, providing a high recall rate. But such searches also tend to pull up a large number of irrelevant works as well–items that the searcher must sort through in order to find the useful documents. Another subject search may result in a smaller set of documents but with a higher proportion of relevant items. Although this search pulls up fewer of the total relevant documents than a search with high recall, the reduction in comprehensiveness is offset by retrieving a smaller, more manageable set with fewer irrelevant items to examine and eliminate. (p. 63)

A method to satiate both needs is to apply specific headings and general headings. Specific headings improve precision and give the user a manageable set of documents. However, these headings could eliminate potentially useful materials. So a way to alleviate that is to also use general headings, which will improve recall. General headings can return results that can subsequently be narrowed down.
3. The bad

But there are some negative aspects that come from the access-enhancing uniformity and specificity of LSCH. One of the major claims against LCSH is that of bias. As Olson (2000) says, LCSH attempts to treat topics with the neutrality of equality, but the concepts of neutrality and equality change. “LCSH has the power to create meaning whether that power is used consciously or not. It cannot be neutral because there is no neutrality or universal meaning. … Therefore, it should be used with a consciousness of that power” (p. 66).

A series of articles in Cataloging & Classification Quarterly discussed the complaints about LCSH. Cochrane and Kirtland (1982) initiated the work by covering the literature from 1944 to 1979, Shubert (1992) furthered it by looking at the 1980s, and Fischer (2005) added to the discussion by looking at the 1990s and early 2000s. The authors found that LCSH has suffered from the same problems for decades, and one of the problems that persisted has been bias. Shubert says there is a “bias in LCSH toward a white, male, Christian (especially Protestant), imperialist and heterosexual view of the world.” Much of this comes from the time period in which LCSH was developed. This was a time – the early 20th century – when Christianity was a public force and before the civil rights and feminist movements. Fischer noted the same biases – “gender bias, Christian-centric vocabulary, and the lack of multicultural headings” – that had been present for decades. Fischer also notes that it is difficult to remove some forms of bias because of their subtlety.

Olson attributes the problem of subtle gender bias to the systemic structure of LCSH – “systemic in that they result from the authority of ‘the public’ and the authority
of literary warrant that are at the foundations of the system” (p. 60). Olson discusses how the structure of the subject heading list shifts the meaning of a term in a particular direction by looking at the “Narrower Terms” for the heading “Feminism.” Only three specific streams of feminism are represented, and more prominent streams – determined by the amount of literature focused on them – are absent. With a lack of relevant narrower terms, feminism appears to be dated and lacking in contemporary thought. Olson says this leads to feminism being homogenized, noting that the term had been applied more than 1,000 times in the Library of Congress catalog, and current research is underrepresented. “If feminism is frozen in the amber of history or relegated to the fringes of otherness, then it is safely differentiated from topics to be treated seriously. This kind of distortion makes it easier to ignore topics that are outside of the cultural mainstream” (p. 62). Finley (2011) contributes more to the topic of LCSH coverage of feminism. Citing Olson, Finley says that LCSH has improved in regards to this topic by adding more specificity to related and narrower terms, but it is still lacking overall.

Bias is not limited to gender or sex. Fina (1993) described her experience trying to locate information on library services for Latinas. At that time, she found that access was very limited for Spanish-speaking users. Fina found that in catalogers’ haste to standardize and save money, they had limited access to information in libraries to those of different cultures saying, “It is clear that information organized according to LCSH shows a bias that is, for the most part, white, male, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant to the exclusion of other views and other sensitivities” (p. 269). Fina gives a specific example of looking for information on Latinos and being directed to the heading “Libraries and the socially handicapped.” This kind of situation flies in the face of the ideals Cutter and
Haykin discussed, like providing access to the user and thinking of the easiest way to get them the information. Fina said, “Not only would I have failed to find information on the first or second try, but ‘turned off’ is an understatement. ... One can easily see how this characterization of the subject would discourage patrons from seeking further access to information” (p. 270).

Mlotkowski (2011) examined how users and describers perceive race and designate race as access points. Mlotkowski had participants – scholars (users), librarians and archivists – apply textual descriptions and subject headings to images featuring either White Americans or African Americans. In regards to subject headings, participants were anywhere from four to thirteen times more likely to apply headings designating race for African Americans as opposed to White Americans. For scholars, 21 percent used term(s) designating race for White Americans while 79 percent applied term(s) designating race for African Americans. For librarians, 5 percent used term(s) designating race for White Americans while 78 percent applied term(s) designating race for African Americans. For archivists, 10 percent used term(s) designating race for White Americans while 83 percent applied term(s) designating race for African Americans. Mlotkowski’s findings support the previously mentioned cultural bias of White Americans as the default status in LCSH. “With 88% of participants in this study identifying with this default status of White, the ILS profession needs to become more aware of a cultural bias it shares with scholars who frequently use library and archival holdings. Bias inherent in our descriptive practices may very well limit accessibility to these resources for underrepresented groups of people” (p. 34).
Another noted problem, which exacerbates the elements of bias, is the amount of time it takes to make changes to LCSH. Adler (2009) looks at how LCSH handles transgender terms and touches on the process of adding or changing subject headings in controlled vocabularies. Originally, only Library of Congress catalogers could create headings. This process has since become more lenient and now “institutions that employ catalogers with sufficient training in LCSH principles and applications may join the Subject Authority Cooperative Program, a component of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC), operated out of the Library of Congress” (p. 313). Adler states that in 2008, 116 institutions proposed new or revised headings through the program. The proposal for a revision or addition requires an approved form, which requires labor and research. An editorial committee decides the fate of the change or addition. The decision hinges on proving literary warrant, which Adler describes as “the use of an actual collection of material or body of literature as the basis for developing an indexing or classification system” (p. 313). In theory, the Library of Congress should create a new heading if one does not exist that appropriately describes an item. But proposals are routinely rejected because the committee determines existing headings sufficiently describe the given subject. This process means that controlled vocabularies usually lack currency. It also aids in the persistence of biases, as changes in descriptors come more slowly than social change. As the meanings and descriptions of terms change or fall out of favor, a quicker process to amend things like LCSH could cut down on bias.

4. The solution?

A common suggestion for a solution to the inherent problems of LCSH is the implementation of user tags or folksonomies as a complement to controlled vocabularies.
This is a solution that has become easier to implement with the proliferation of the Internet. Folksonomies can be more comprehensive because they are applied by users who have personal experience with the concepts. Folksonomies also provide more ways to appropriately describe a subject. Using the example of feminism, which lacked enough appropriate and relevant subdivisions, user tags could add depth through proper descriptions.

In looking at transgender books in LibraryThing, Adler (2009) found that there is a disconnect between the terms used by the people who own these books and the subject headings available in LCSH. This plays into the idea that people with personal experience and knowledge can more accurately describe a subject than can a cataloger who may have no knowledge of the intricacies of the subject. There also tended to be some degree of consensus in the user tags, as certain words were predominantly used. Adler also found that this is not a perfect system. Like LCSH, folksonomies have their positives and negatives. “While controlled vocabularies enable precision and findability, their universal, uniform nature prohibits and marginalizes alternative expressions, and they are slow to adopt new terms. Folksonomies, on the other hand, are democratic, allow for shifts and changes in vocabularies, and allow spaces for the ‘long tail.’ However, the lack of control impedes findability” (p. 328).

Rolla (2009) and Finley (2011) both had similar findings to Adler. Each looked at the use of folksonomies on LibraryThing and determined that they add value to the description of materials. Both also recognized the fact that problems would arise with user contribution. Finley, in particular, points out the metadata problem that would arise
with misspellings. Both suggest a complementary system in online catalogs that could use the structure of LCSH combined with the relevance of user tags.
III. The Project

1. The collection

The main goal of this project was to improve access to theses and dissertations written by students in University of North Carolina’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Park Library has three types of student research papers: undergraduate honors theses, master’s theses and doctoral dissertations. As of this writing, there are 215 undergraduate honors theses, 660 master’s papers and 179 doctoral dissertations. There are printed copies of each title located at Park Library, and the full text of many of the more recent master’s theses (since 2006) and doctoral dissertations (since 1998) is available through the online catalog. Very few, however, have subject headings. I focused on undergraduate honors theses for two reasons: They are the most popular student papers at Park Library and I lacked the amount of time needed to apply subject headings to the more than 1,000 theses and dissertations.

Undergraduates in the honors program often use previous theses as points of reference for their research. The problem with lack of access arises when a student only has a vague idea of the title of a relevant work. According to Stephanie Willen Brown (SWB), director of Park Library, a common occurrence is for an adviser or professor to refer a student to theses that could be of interest. Sometimes, the reference is missing the exact title and author, replaced instead with a general description of the thesis. It is likely that the student will not find the thesis if the description differentiates too much from the
title of the thesis. Therefore, the idea is to apply LCSH to the theses as a way of increasing the likelihood that a user can find relevant materials.

2. Review of similar institutions

Before I started applying subject headings to the theses, I wanted to see how similar institutions described similar materials. SWB identified universities that have journalism and mass communication programs on par with that of UNC. I then explored each of these universities’ online catalogs in order to see how their catalogers treated their theses. The peer universities were: Ohio State University, Oregon State University, Syracuse University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Colorado at Boulder, University of Missouri at Columbia, and University of North Texas. I found there to be variation in the amounts of access and description applied to their theses. Here is a summary of my findings:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ohio State University</td>
<td>Theses are found in the online catalog and are available by department on a separate website. Some are available as full text PDFs. Some have LCSH, but they are the minority. Those that do have an average of two subject headings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon State University</td>
<td>Theses are not easily found as they do not appear to be discoverable through the online catalog. Some are available as full text PDFs. Those that have descriptive terms appear to be author-supplied keywords and not LCSH.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse University</td>
<td>Theses have not been microfilmed and are available only in original paper format in the archives. They do not appear to be indexed in the online catalog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of California at Berkeley</td>
<td>Theses easily found in online catalog. Some available online as PDFs. Most have LCSH, using at least two headings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Colorado at Boulder</td>
<td>Theses easily found in online catalog as users can search for specifically for theses and dissertations. Some available as PDFs. Most have LCSH, using at least two headings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Missouri at Columbia</td>
<td>Theses discoverable through online catalog. Most appear to be available as PDFs. Most have abstracts attached to enhance description. Most have LCSH, using multiple headings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of North Texas</td>
<td>A record of every thesis listed in the online catalog. Some available electronically as PDFs. Most use LCSH, having multiple headings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So after the completion of describing all theses and dissertations, Park Library will be on par with its peers who provide similar access.

3. Application

We wanted to rely on the usefulness of keyword searching in UNC’s online catalog. We do not expect users to search for subject headings as a way of finding the desired theses. We expect that they will perform keyword searches of the terms in the general descriptions they receive. This line of thinking shaped how we approached the application of LCSH.
We decided to apply two to five headings per thesis. This approach ties in with Marshall’s views of precision versus recall. We tried to provide enough description to improve access, but not so much that irrelevant titles would appear in searches. This could be more of a problem considering the fact that Park Library has a niche collection dealing with journalism and mass communication. Since that is the case, adding broad headings like “Journalism” or “Advertising” would do little to no good because they could be applied to so many titles.

We also did not want to be redundant with the terms we applied. If a title had a combination of words that was the same as a subject heading, we would look for another way to describe it as opposed to repeating terms that were already used. Take for example the thesis “Free Press-Fair Trial: Pretrial Publicity in the Sam Sheppard and David Berkowitz Cases.” This is an example where a subject heading is found in the title. In this case it is “Free press and fair trial.” So I did not use that subject heading because a keyword search for those terms would already result in the retrieval of the thesis, thus making the subject heading redundant. Instead, I supplemented the title with other headings that will hopefully help users discover it.

Methodology of the author was another major consideration in the application of subject headings. While some students may want to review theses with similar topics, others may want to see how research was conducted. The type of research – such as content analyses, focus groups, Psychology experiments, etc. – can provide students with examples of how to carry out their experiments. Although it is much rarer than the first example, this is another instance where the title may serve as a subject heading.
4. Methodology

My method for applying LCSH was using a combination of Classification Web and the UNC online catalog. Classification Web is a fee-based website provided by the Library of Congress. I used these in conjunction in order to get suggestions for appropriate descriptors.

My first step in searching for new terms was consulting the descriptions provided by the author of the thesis. Newer theses have abstracts and tables of contents, which are great indicators of the focus. This made for a quick extraction of keywords for which I then found correlating subject headings. One thing I wanted to avoid was making assumptions as to what the author was covering. I went with a superficial approach of taking the words at face value and not looking for ways to make inferences about them.

With a list of terms in mind, I then turned to the combination of UNC’s catalog and Classification Web. Consulting the author’s description of the aforementioned “Free Press-Fair Trial: Pretrial Publicity in the Sam Sheppard and David Berkowitz Cases,” resulted in noticing the concepts of newspapers and court reporting. I found UNC’s catalog to be the easiest way to find headings when I did not know the specific wording. This is because of the real-time suggestions it makes when typing. In this example, seen in the figure below, I typed “court reporting” and immediately saw what I was looking for: “Newspaper court reporting.”
“Newspaper court reporting” is listed as a subject in the catalog, but I always consulted with Classification Web to make sure it is correct and to get ideas for more headings. There were times that I found a heading listed in the catalog that was actually a former heading, which makes checking for current terms vital. Checking the term also gave the opportunity to see if I was on the right track and helped me discover related, broader or narrower terms. In the case of “Newspaper court reporting,” LCSH tells me that this

**Newspaper court reporting** (May Subd Geog)

UF Court reporting (by newspapers)
   Gag rule
   Trial reporting
   Trials in the press

BT Free press and fair trial
   Journalism, Legal
   Reporters and reporting

NT Courtroom art

subject heading is used for “Court reporting.” It also tells me that “Free press and fair trial” is a broader term, which lets me know that I am using the terms in the correct way. It also gives me an idea for another broader term, “Journalism, Legal.” I talked about avoiding the
“Journalism” subject heading because it is too broad. But I believe the addition of a specific type of journalism – in this case “Legal” – makes this of use. On the other hand, the third broader term, “Reporters and reporting,” is too broad to be of any use as many of the theses deal with such a topic. Also, the use of the catalog makes it easy to see what terms have been applied by catalogers to titles with similar subject matter. Searching for the subject “Free press and fair trial” shows titles dealing with media coverage of the courts. A majority of these titles have the headings “Newspaper court reporting” and “Journalism, Legal,” which reinforces their relevance to the thesis. But the search also leads to the discovery of “Law reporting.” The combination of these three subject headings with the words in the title hopefully results in improved access for the users as there are now different words describing similar concepts and multiple points of entry. The use of “court,” “law” and “legal” all hit on the same concept, but the alternate wording compensates for patrons using different search terms.

Of note in working with a specialized collection is the recurrence of common themes. As it is the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, many students have touched on similar topics. Therefore, as I became more proficient and familiar with certain terms for these recurring topics, I could easily recall and apply them. But it was also important not to fall into the trap of complacency when seeing common terms in titles and applying headings without actually looking at the content. Doing this can hinder the discovery process by returning irrelevant items.

In the “Free press and fair trial” example, Classification Web was helpful in finding other subject headings that were reinforced by the catalog. But the process also worked in reverse if Classification Web was not as helpful. Take for example the thesis
“Libel and Compelled Disclosure of Sources: Court Decisions and Journalists’ Perceptions.” This title focuses primarily on a topic that is important to journalists: shield laws. However, a search for “shield laws” in Classification Web returns no results. So in this case, and others like it, I turned to the catalog and searched for titles about shield laws. Comparing numerous titles led to the discovery of the heading “Confidential communications – Press.” Using the work of professional catalogers, I was able to find the appropriate way to describe a topic when it was not apparent using Classification Web.

Another point to note in the use of UNC’s catalog is that it gives an idea as to the popularity of a heading. I tried to avoid using headings that did not yield many results in the catalog. The reasoning for this is that it could cut down on serendipitous discovery by not having as many similar items that could lead to the given thesis. However, this was not a problem working with this type of collection because there are so many similar titles that have sufficient descriptors attached to them.

The final step is the addition of the subject headings to the thesis through Millennium software. This requires the use of the MARC bibliographic format. Since a vast majority of the subject headings were topical headings, there was not much difficulty with this process. Occasionally, there would be other types of headings, such as personal or corporate names or uniform titles. This is another instance where I relied on the expertise of the professional catalogers at UNC. The full MARC record for an item can be viewed in the catalog, revealing the MARC field, indicators and subfield codes. And through the use of headings that already appear in the catalog, it was a very easy process to make sure I entered the correct information.
With both the entry of the MARC information and the headings themselves, I used Classification Web as the authoritative source for things like spelling and capitalization while using UNC’s catalog to more easily browse for the terms for which I was looking. Using the work of others made the process much easier to understand and much faster to implement.

5. Observations

Having worked with a variety of different theses, I can say that I noticed some of the biases previously mentioned by others. I got the feeling that the “norm” as far as LCSH is concerned is a white male. Take for example the theses “Contemporary Black newspapers in North Carolina” and “Success is everything: local newspaper coverage of collegiate women's basketball programs from 1992 to 2008.” Both deal with groups that are not white males and both have specific headings as such. For the former example, “African American Newspapers” and “African Americans in the newspaper industry” were used as subject headings. This fits and is very specific to the thesis, but there is no “White Americans in the newspaper industry” heading. In the latter example, “Basketball for women” is a subject heading that describes the content. And much like there was no equivalent heading in the other example, there is no equivalent heading for men in this one.

From what I read in the literature, I can tell that LCSH has adapted and become less offensive to some groups. Whereas there were no headings for Latinas when Fina was searching for information, today a search for “Latinas” in Classification Web informs the user that “Hispanic American women” is the correct heading used instead. In a way, there is a paper trail that details biases that have since been improved upon or
eradicated. In another instance I was searching for a term describing people of the Appalachian region. I found the heading “Appalachians (People),” which made sense. What I did not expect to find was the former heading of “Mountain whites (Southern States).” I found this to be terribly biased as one would probably think that people of various races live in the mountains. So former headings show that LCSH has made changes to be less offensive, but they do not show how long it took to make that change. There is no way of knowing how long people may have clamored for a change from “Mountain whites” to something more inclusive. But according to the literature, it may have been awhile.

A final point of note is the fact that applying subject headings is subjective. Before I started the project, I was told that no two catalogers will describe an item in the exact same way and even a single cataloger will describe an item differently on different days. I found this to be true. As I noticed the recurrence of theses with similar topics, I would inevitably find new subject headings that would be good complements to those I previously discovered. For this reason, it was easy to get bogged down looking for perfect descriptors. This is another reason why the work of professionals was so valuable. Seeing how they used the terms helped me determine if I was also using them correctly. There were times when I came upon a heading that I thought would fit a thesis, only to discover that it was used in a different way in the catalog. LCSH scope notes work in the same way, but they are not always available. Therefore, seeing the application of headings by others worked as a way to describe a term and gave me an idea of perspective.
IV. Conclusion and Suggestions

The ultimate goal for this project was to enhance access to a frequently used library collection. I wanted to follow existing standards at UNC by applying LCSH in a way that new entry points would be presented to users. With a focus on users performing keyword searches, I applied headings in a way that concepts were described using synonymous terms. As I progressed and became more proficient in applying LCSH, I began noticing biases that I later found to be well documented in previous research. At the root of these biases is a default status of white male. Studies have looked for ways to supplement LCSH with other systems – like user- or author-supplied keywords – that would make description less biased, but these systems present their own problems, like a need for increased moderation.

But before considering alternatives to LCSH for this collection, I think a look at usage statistics would be beneficial. SWB says that the theses are most requested in the fall semester. Therefore, one could compare circulation numbers for the theses for the fall semesters before and after the application of LCSH. Other factors would need to be considered, but this could be an indication of the effect of subject headings.

Another option could be the use of a submission process similar to the one used by the School of Information and Library Science (SILS). For theses and dissertations, SILS requires authors to fill in descriptive fields for the paper, such as the abstract and subject headings. Something like an abstract could be particularly effective as it would likely use different terminology than that used by LCSH. However, it could also have a
negative effect on precision by causing more works to be recalled through keyword searching. Author-supplied subject headings would also be problematic because students in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication likely have no training in cataloging. The author could supply keywords for which a librarian could find correlating subject headings. But if it is not a system where the authors can add the descriptors themselves, it would lead to more work for an already overworked Park staff.

A primary goal of libraries and librarians is to provide users with information. I hope this project can have an immediate impact and help in fulfilling that goal by improving users’ access to information. Regardless of the impact, I am pleased that I had an opportunity to help Park Library in its quest to provide information and knowledge.
V. Bibliography


