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The correct language of cataloguing local publications in East Africa

The correct language of cataloguing

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the subject cataloguing of local publications and subject access to local publications.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach was used. Methods included interviews, document reviews and observations.

Findings – Adherence to cataloguing standards takes precedence over subject access. Rarely is a user the focus of choice of the subject term in the process of cataloguing. The terms assigned to local publications are generally too broad and, at times, border on inappropriateness. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of documented cataloguing policies and a waning interest in cataloguing matters from the profession.

Originality/value – This study is intended to benefit the librarians who provide subject representation to local publications by way of streamlining the process of subject cataloguing, hence, enhancing access to these uniquely held resources. The outcome of this study, hence, will provide insight in the process of cataloguing local publications. In addition, the findings of this study will benefit the teaching of subject cataloguing in library and information science programs. The findings from this study are expected to contribute to the body of library science by enabling a localized view to subject assignment. Ultimately, the significance of the study lies in its contribution to cataloguing education and research, especially with a perspective from Africa.

Keywords Cataloguing standards, Cataloguing practice, Subject cataloguing, Subject headings

Paper type Research paper

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is explicit on the right to know and the freedom of expression which are part and parcel of the normal practice and professional responsibilities of libraries. Thus, libraries uphold the freedom of access and freedom of expression by making decisions on what resources to acquire via resource description, classification and subject headings.

The community of users that accesses library collections, depends on the consistency of a series of actions carried out routinely by library staff. These actions shape the collections and directly impact on access of resources by library users. Historically, libraries have provided access to resources by author, title and subject through



cataloguing and classification. The different types of access created are very systematic and allow almost no room for deviation. There are standards and rules to guide the cataloguing and classification of resources in libraries. Access by subject is created through assignation of subject headings and classification numbers. There are several classification systems adopted by libraries, for example, the Dewey Decimal Classification Scheme, the Library of Congress Classification (LCC) Scheme and the Universal Decimal Classification Scheme. Cataloguing is guided by the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules till recently, when Resource Description and Access was introduced. On the other hand, the subject heading systems in use include the Sears List of Subject Headings, the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and various subject thesauri like AGROVOC that cover terminology of all subject fields in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, food and related domains (Agricultural Information Management Standards). The controlled access is but one characteristic that typifies libraries as spaces of control.

Drabinski (2013) presents an exposition into queering the catalogue, stressing that libraries are spaces where language matters. Hence, the resources acquired are linguistically controlled through classification notations and described through standardized terminologies that universalize the library experience. However, the linguistic controls place restrictions on the user whose search terms may not be available in the authorized cum standardized list of subject headings. Shirky (2005) agrees that current standards observe what is referred to as the ontologically and objectively true viewpoint, which fails to accommodate the diversity of cultures, languages and local perspectives of the library users.

Several scholars have noted disadvantages with the linguistic control in the LCSH as the most widely used subject heading system (Olson, 2000). Notable among many is the fact that the LCSH are Western oriented, and therefore skewed toward the Western perspective that suppresses the indigenous point of view which marginalizes the user, who is incognizant of the “correct language” as prescribed by the “universal standards”. Buckland (1999) contends that unfamiliar vocabulary reduces search effectiveness, and hence the importance of adopting terminologies that are user centered.

Olson and Schlegel (2001) have noted that some topics are ghettoized, omitted, inappropriately represented and, therefore, fail to accurately represent local publications. They specifically attribute omission to a problem of underlying assumptions and cite inaccurate understanding of African languages and people. The end result in both cases is failure to represent the publications and therefore limit access by subject.

Statement of the problem

Libraries are part of the bibliographic sector in society, and their role is to collectively take output of the publishing industry and endeavor to make it accessible to the public (Rubin, 2004). In doing so, they are providing intellectual and physical access to information. In pursuant of this objective, libraries at Makerere University (Uganda) and University of Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) that hold information resources in their mandate as legal depositories face a great challenge in creating access to these resources, as they have to be originally catalogued because they are uniquely held local publications. Local publications are conceptualized as those materials that are published locally and uniquely held at Makerere University Library (Maklib), Uganda,

and University of Dar-es-Salaam Library (UDSMlib), Tanzania, as mandated by [Makerere University College \(Deposit Library\) Act \(1964\)](#), 1964 and the Legal Deposit Act of 1962 in Tanzania ([Republic of Tanzania, 1962](#)). Local publications play a big role in the cultural life of a locale through the authorship of local authors.

Hence, these are locally authored materials or materials of specific local significance. The understanding is that local publications reflect in some way the lives of the communities in which they are written or published. In such books, sometimes, the author is earmarking the most conventional ideas and, alternately, equal importance is accorded to the vernacular. More often, these publications are self-published and hence more likely to have no bibliographic information outside the legal depositories. The challenge for the librarian is in determining the subject terms from the authorized subject vocabulary that is characterized with the Eurocentric nature of the subject headings that do not fully represent the African culture, values and customs ([Peterson, 2002](#)). As a result, the subject representation of local publications is skewed toward the Western perspective suppressing the indigenous point of view and hence marginalizing library users who should be the center of all cataloguing.

Faced with the above challenges, there is inconsistent application of subject headings, defeating the major reason for cataloguing. This practice renders many aspects of African information materials inaccessible and underutilized. In view of the above, there is a critical need to have subject terms that are culturally relevant and adequately represent local publications. Several studies have looked at the issue of subject access by comparing keywords versus subject headings, but there is scant evidence of the viewpoint from the cataloguing librarians.

The research questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

- RQ1.* How do librarians provide access to local publications?
- RQ2.* To what extent do the international subject headings represent the content in local subject headings?

The purpose of this study was to examine the subject cataloguing of local publications in universities in East Africa taking Makerere University and University of Dar-es-Salaam (UDSM) as case studies.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach that used exploratory and descriptive research questions that were considered appropriate for a qualitative approach as stated by [Gay and Airasian \(2000\)](#). Qualitative studies allow a personal understanding of the phenomenon, and, in such studies, the results are likely to contribute valuable knowledge to the community. The valuable community in this study comprised librarians who carry out cataloguing operations as their day-to-day activity.

The researcher adopted a case study research design to explore subject access to local publications. She spent 10 days with the cataloguers at Maklib, one of the study sites, observing the cataloguing process of local publications and five days at the UDSMlib. This approach allowed the researcher to study the cataloguing of local publications in the cataloguing departments, the natural setting for cataloguing, and to interact with the users, mostly undertaking research using these particular resources. This enabled the

researcher to describe in detail how the different libraries approach the cataloguing of the local information resources and the rationale for the existing cataloguing practices. Descriptive language was used to explain the findings and a narrative style adapted to give a voice to the participants.

The study used a non-random sampling design. According to Neuman (2011), qualitative studies do not normally require having representative samples but rather a non-probability sample is considered appropriate, and, therefore, one need not determine the sample size in advance. Thus, the study found a non-random sampling design suitable, as the intention was not to generalize but to delve deeper and therefore provide more insight into subject cataloguing of local publications.

In total, 11 in-depth interviews were carried out with the cataloguing staff. The interviewees included staff charged with cataloguing of local publications at the Makerere University and UDSM. Their level of education varied from certificate to PhD as indicated in Table I and cataloguing experience from 1.5 to 36 years.

The two universities were purposely selected, as they are both legal depositories and have substantive collections of a local nature. In Maklib, the collection in Africana section stands at 82,593 volumes. Of these, 20 per cent are theses, 18 per cent are government publications and 62 per cent are local publications acquired through either legal deposit or purchase. Of the 62 per cent, 5,120 volumes are in Ugandan local languages and Swahili. In UDSMlib, the East Africana collection is estimated to be over 55,000 volumes, with an unclear number in Swahili. Both collections, Africana (Maklib) and East Africana (UDSMlib), consist of books, pamphlets, periodicals, newspapers, manuscripts, theses and reprints on the East African region.

All interviews were conducted face to face between March and May 2012. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed. The interview data were analyzed and coded using the interpretive approach following three stages, data reduction, data categorization and data verification, that facilitated the drawing of conclusions.

Discussion of results

As evidenced in Table I, cataloguing in Maklib is a preserve of professional librarians, typically a librarian with a Bachelor in Library and Information Science (LIS) to a PhD, while, in UDSM, it is the library assistants who are involved in cataloguing. Anyone with a qualification below a Bachelor in LIS in East Africa is considered a paraprofessional. The librarians in these two institutions have an academic status, but, in UDSM, they also double as teaching staff in the library school, which partly explains the involvement of library assistants in the cataloguing of library resources. This corroborates with the discussion by Cox and Myers (2010) and Leysen and Boydston (2005) who argued that it is common to find paraprofessionals cataloguing, leaving the more intellectual tasks for professionals. However, library assistants are usually more involved in copy cataloguing and original cataloguing a preserve of professionals.

Table I.
Level of library and
information
education of the
interviewees

University library	Certificate	Diploma	Bachelors	Masters	PhD	Total
UDSMlib	2	1		1		4
Maklib			4	2	1	7
Total	2	1	4	3	1	11

LCSH are used for verbal subject access like in many other libraries all over the world (Hoffman, 2013; Chan, 2005). However, it was observed that the editions varied, as one library used the 30th edition and another used the 15th edition. According to Zeng (2008), the need to update indexing languages in online catalogues is paramount to keep pace with the scientific progress and the plethora of dynamic and progressive research generated by universities. Using old cataloguing tools for information representation simply implies that current research will have no terminology to adequately describe it, as there will be no way of capturing current subject headings. Moreover, the adaptation of terminology to the needs of the users cannot depend on tools that are outdated for topics that are already considered marginalized through biased language. In such cases, it is only logical that the cataloguer will improvise as the cataloguer at UDSM aptly stated, but what a compromise to subject access.

How subjects are assigned

When asked how they go about subject assignment, the respondents indicated that they look at the introduction and/or abstract if provided. However, one cataloguing staff also indicated that, at times, it was not possible to tell the subject from the introduction and abstract provided in the book, especially if the work was in interdisciplinary areas; therefore, the Table of Contents and Submission Award were also consulted:

I look at the title, read the abstract. I only look at the introduction after I have failed and sometimes, the findings too – [Cataloguer from Maklib].

At times it is not enough to look at the abstract when the book is interdisciplinary, so I even look at the Table of Contents of even the degree to situate the subject – [Cataloguer from UDSMlib].

One other cataloguer went on to say that he specifically read the abstract and study objectives to come up with what he considered an appropriate subject in cases of theses and dissertations. In both libraries, theses and dissertations make up a substantive proportion of the local publications and consequently, the challenge to catalogue. The lack of competence in subject disciplines does not make it any easier. This is further compounded by the titles that do not match the contents in the theses.

On the question of how many subjects are assigned per work, a cataloguer from UDSMlib indicated that he assigned an average of five subjects. In Maklib, the average was two subject headings per book. In both libraries, it was indicated that there were no limits to the number of subjects that could be assigned. However, the Library of Congress (LC) practice is that the number of headings varies according to the work being catalogued, in any case, not more than ten. In my observation, the number of subjects in one library kept increasing due to the fact that the library system in use could not take subdivided subjects. As such, subdivisions were also considered as subject headings and hence many local publications had names of countries as main subjects.

Findings further indicated that the cataloguing staff greatly used the Library of Congress Online Catalogue (LOC) as a bibliographic utility. In this case, the role of LOC was to try and find similar headings but not necessarily a matching record. There was an apparent hesitancy in assigning subject headings outside the LCSH, as heading correctness is attached to presence in the LCSH. In these libraries, quality cataloguing is measured in terms of strict adherence to “universal” cataloguing rules.

In both libraries, there was a notable absence of in-house guidelines for subject cataloguing. The interviewees concurred that a lot depended on the individual cataloguer. In cases where there were in-house guidelines, they were silent on assignment of subjects:

There are no in-house cataloguing rules. I depend on myself. I have no one to ask – [Cataloguer, UDSMlib].

We have a cataloguing manual, but there is nothing on subject headings, none at all – [Cataloguer, Maklib].

We have the subject heading lists, that's it – [Cataloguer, Maklib].

Lack of streamlined procedures makes it incumbent to the cataloguing librarians to rely heavily on personal judgment, which results into inconsistencies. One cataloguer at UDSM said:

I sometimes feel alone when cataloguing. I have to make important decisions on subjects. It is a headache without guidelines.

Documenting cataloguing policies would provide the first step toward building a strategic plan for equitable access.

Appropriateness of subject headings

Under appropriateness, three themes emerged: suitability of headings, inconsistency in local headings and omission of headings:

It is at times hard to get an appropriate subject when the book coverage is local – [Cataloguer, UDSMlib].

It is hard to relate to the language in LCSH, [...] I mean, getting the equivalent of the subject content in the red books – [Cataloguer, Maklib].

Several times, I get the subject from the head (I improvise) because I know such a term is not in the red books – [Cataloguer, UDSMlib].

Hmm [...] finding subjects was not be a big problem for me, but what about for the users? The terms we use are not always the same terms that users search by. You see, even spellings are different, for example, labor versus labour – [Cataloguer, Maklib].

The interviewees indicated that difficult cases to catalogue were usually put aside and publications considered easy were worked on first. When asked what comprised the difficult cases, the responses zeroed on the failure to find appropriate subjects from the LCSH. Emerging from the responses, it was clear that there were no documented cataloguing guidelines specifically for subject headings. However, the cataloguing practice was to strictly adhere to the LCSH as much as possible, as it is considered the standard. This implied that no matter what the subject matter was, an equivalent subject heading had to be found even when it bordered on inappropriateness.

The case in example is the term “Education, Elementary”. Elementary education in the LC context does not adequately communicate “Primary education ” in East Africa. However, in strict adherence to the LC cataloguing standard, for all local publications on primary education, the subject heading used was “Education, Elementary”.

Second example, in Tanzania and Uganda, there are several tribes and each tribe has a dialect. There is a popular way of spelling each tribe but LC also has another way, “the standard way”. For this reason, there are glaring inconsistencies in the terms used for the same tribe and its dialect, e.g. the Banyankore in Uganda speak Runyankore. In the LCSH, the heading is:

1. Nyankole language:
 - UF Lunyankole;
 - Nkole;
 - Nkore; and
 - Nyankore.

And that is acceptable, but then cross references with Rukiga language as known in Uganda as follows.

Chiga language [LCSHs] note the first syllables in bold and in another instance the **Chi** is interchanged with **Ki** in **Nyankore-Kiga**:

2. Nyankore-Kiga;
 - UF Nkore-kiga language;
 - **Runyankore-Rukiga** (*Compare with Lunyankole in 1. above*); and
 - RT **chi**ga language.

In the absence of local guidelines on subject assignment, such inconsistencies breed confusion among cataloguers and, in turn, the library users.

On omission, the LCSH were primarily for the LC audience (Chan, 2001). Despite its adoption by many libraries all over the world, there has not been sufficient inclusion of issues outside the Western world. For example, the heading “Politics and government” is used broadly in both the Tanzanian and Ugandan issues. Many happenings in the political sphere in both countries cannot adequately fit into what the LC provides. As already discussed above, the fact that cataloguers strictly adhere to the headings in the LCSH list, local politics, cultures, ideas, etc. are, to a great extent, misrepresented, as they are seen through a lens that is foreign.

In addition, there are common themes of study but which have no direct subject appearances in the LCSH. Take for example poverty; the population living below the poverty line is 37.6 and 24.5 per cent in Tanzania and Uganda, respectively (CIA fact book, 2014). Therefore, it follows that a lot of research goes toward the causes, consequences and, last but not the least, mitigation of poverty. However, the LCSH use “Poverty” to embody all the aforementioned aspects of poverty including poverty alleviation. To the library user, a search on poverty eradication would return inconclusive results unless the cataloguer created subject authorities.

The subject authority would provide unused terms and related terms through the “see” and “see also” references. The contention here is that even if the term used in the LCSH was inappropriate, the cataloguing librarian has the leeway to use the term the users find appropriate either as a direct subject or through a see reference.

Mann (2007) emphasized that when cataloguers put in more intellectual effort in the terms assigned, the easier it will be for the researchers to retrieve what they require. The emphasis is on having corresponding subject authority files that will ensure successful searching by subject headings (Miksa, 2008).

Implications for libraries

Integration of universal and local cataloguing practice

Librarians should consider integrating “universal cataloguing practice” with local practice. The meek acceptance of standards is not acceptable, as it takes the focus away from the user, for whom access is created. The LC subject cataloguing manual that is religiously followed creates room for local subjects. Ultimately, there is a need for the cataloguers to re-orient themselves with the LC practice in a bid to improve resource discovery, especially in the case of local publications. A hybrid of the “international” and local terms would provide the ultimate practice.

Emphasis on authority control

In cataloguing lies power and control as opined by Miksa (2008). For the librarians who wield this power to realize this status, there is a need to critically think through the cataloguing processes. The findings illustrated that the cataloguing staff in one location actually focuses more on achieving numbers rather than fostering subject access. In addition, it was revealed that neither of these libraries carried out authority control of any sort. It is not enough to assign subjects, but it is required to go further by creating authority files, which is the missing link in creating subject access to local publications. Authority control should not be separated from subject cataloguing, but should be taken as part and parcel of cataloguing. Hence, streamlining the cataloguing workflow to clearly highlight the additional tasks would lead to effective subject representation of local publications.

Development of in-house cataloguing policies

In cataloguing, there are powerful pressures to assign subjects according to rules. These could be international, national or even in-house rules. In-house cataloguing rules are opined to guide the cataloguer in complex cataloguing situations. Absence of in-house cataloguing manuals implies that cataloguers rely on personal judgment in many instances. This could have significant implications on subject access, especially where library assistants or novice cataloguers are left in charge of cataloguing operations. Oftentimes, they may not have the ability to make subject decisions outside what is considered the norm. In-house guidelines would offer adequate guidance in solving complex and not so obvious cataloguing cases even to the not so well-prepared cataloguer.

Collaboration between cataloguers and authors

Librarians in the East African region are not usually experts in subject domains. This lack of subject expertise hampers subject assignment. Therefore, the likelihood that collaborating with the people who have the expertise, in this case authors, to contribute subject headings (Alemu *et al.*, 2014) that would enhance access is great.

Training of cataloguers

There is a strong need to strengthen cataloguing education in library schools within the region. Cataloguing of local publications is largely an original cataloguing affair that requires a lot of skill and expertise. Library schools need to inculcate critical thinking in cataloguer education to equip their students for the workplace. That notwithstanding, there is no amount of training that will have the new cataloguer ready for the workplace, as many routines are localized to a particular library. Hence, the practicing librarians

need to help library students with transforming the theoretical skill into actual practice as such, and emphasis should be put on internship of new librarians.

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Conclusion

The subject approach remains a key access point to library collections amidst champions of keyword searching in library systems on the market. Libraries have continued to collect resources that are judged relevant to the needs of the community of users; however, there is a let-down if this is not taken a step further through empowering the user access through appropriate subject headings. The correct language should only be gauged by how user centered it is in view of the library's primary users. The current practice of creating subject access will be greatly enhanced through streamlined workflows that follow clear policies and guidelines that spell out the necessity of user-centered cataloguing. Subject authority supplemented with in-house thesauruses could be the starting point to a culturally focused information retrieval paradigm and, hence, the correct language.

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