

Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies

Volume 7

Article 7


2020

Review of Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control

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Recommended Citation

Carbajal, Itza A. (2020) "Review of Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 7 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol7/iss1/7>

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Jane Sandberg, ed. *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019.

For those grappling with the ethical implications of descriptive practices in knowledge production, behold a book almost exclusively dedicated to some of the questions that keep many of us up at night. Questions such as how and if name authority records should document gender variances and sex. What barriers exist to non-English and non-Roman documentation of person and place names? With new technologies and capabilities such as linked data, what sort of potential issues can arise? Or how does privacy fit into authority work and metadata? Finally, what roles can authors and creators play in improving and contributing to standardized authority records? All of this and more can be found in the recently published *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control* (ISBN: 978-1-63400-054-3) edited by Jane Sandberg and available through Litwin Books and Library Juice Press. As Sandberg notes in the introduction, “names have a way of collecting stories,” with this compilation’s featured authors each providing critical and empathic reflections on these stories and much more.¹

The book *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control* consists of eighteen chapters split into five thematic parts, each addressing a critical or emerging topic in relation to name authority control. Part 1 looks closely at questions of consent, anonymity, and privacy. Part 2 discusses the impact colonization continues to have on name authority records and systems through political, economic, and cultural control using two distinct case studies focused on the United States and the Middle East. Part 3 addresses recent responses to the 2016 report compiled by the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) Ad Hoc Task Group on Gender in Authority Records, paying particular attention to the impact these recommendations will have on the description and documentation of transgender and non-Western LGBTQ people. Part 4 looks at the role of newer technology and the benefits and potential harm these new approaches could bring to metadata practices. Lastly, part 5 offers tools and strategies for addressing some of the questions and concerns of those in library, archives, and information fields.

This review summarizes a select number of the included chapters starting with the first piece in the book, by Violet B. Fox and Kelly Swickard, titled “‘My Zine Life Is My Private Life’: Reframing Authority Control from Detective Work to an Ethic of Care.” This piece nicely sets the tone for the rest of book as the writers force the reader to consider the question, “what if an author does not want acknowledgment or attribution?” To further complicate this question, what if that same attribution actually places the author in danger? Fox and Swickard pose these questions through their analysis of a recent case at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), where the university administration exposed the personal information of an alumnus without their consent. University administrations typically carefully evaluate when to publicly

¹ Jane Sandberg, Introduction to *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019), 1.

disclose personal information such as home address or phone number, but what should be done about disclosing a person's legal name if that person does not want that name connected to their artistic work? This case of the MICA alumnus involved a muralist and graffiti artist using the artistic pseudonym Gaia, and an email sent by the MICA administration for a charity auction that disclosed Gaia's personal name instead of their pseudonym. At first glance, one would assume Gaia as an artist would want their personal information to be known and properly attributed especially since the art world often depends on recognition and exposure as a way of acquiring fame and wealth. The key to the Gaia and MICA predicament rests on the fact that Gaia as an artist chose an art form that at times meant they would be performing "crimes against property" resulting in Gaia's potential persecution.² This situation not only rings true for graffiti artists, but also for writers, artists, community organizers, and others working on issues or using methods deemed unlawful. Writers, zinesters, and artists may be forced to use pseudonyms in order to protect themselves and their loved ones, but their materials may very likely still make their way into a collection. These individuals can face dangers including imprisonment or fines simply because LIS professionals try to act on good intentions and fail to acknowledge the wishes of the creator. How can LIS professionals say that the idea of attribution outweighs a person's safety and well-being?

Similar to Fox and Swickard's call for privileging creator agency, Michelle Kazmer in the article "Identity Theft: How Authority Control Undermines Women's Agency," argues against current structural and cultural tendencies to undermine a woman's choice with the case study of women authors. Openly framed as a discussion on "Western, primarily Anglo-American authority control of women's names, and predominantly white women's names," Kazmer introduces several examples of author identity violations, including Agatha Christie and J. K. Rowling.³ In the Agatha Christie scenario, Christie herself, most known for her detective writing, also created the pseudonym Mary Westmacott that Christie used to write semi-autobiographical non-detective novels. Despite the fact that Christie opposed the interlinking of these two identities, the US Copyright Office of the Library of Congress still made that connection publicly available. Unlike Christie, whose identity violation came from a formal information managing institution, the case of J. K. Rowling demonstrates some of the perils of emerging trends and technologies in libraries and archives around automation and big data analysis. As a result of the increased possibility of using technology to pry into people's lives, in 2013 a journalist contracted a computer scientist to expose J. K. Rowling's identity as Robert Galbraith, a male pseudonym used to publish Rowling's detective novels, through computational analysis. Not only do these examples demonstrate the continued neglect of a woman's agency, but they also bring to light issues of how big data and the methods and tools of computational analysis keep expanding and complicating the realm of personal, private, and public.

² Violet B. Fox and Kelly Swickard, "My Zine Life Is My Private Life': Reframing Authority Control from Detective Work to an Ethic of Care," in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 12.

³ Michelle M. Kazmer, "Identity Theft: How Authority Control Undermines Women's Agency," in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 27.

The following section highlights questions regarding colonialism’s negative impact on authority control records, description practices, and standardization. Although this part of the book includes only two chapters, the topics serve as an important reminder of the impact of colonialism and cultural hegemony in the United States, the Middle East, and beyond, and its stain on authority record creation, management, and use. The piece by Erin Elzi and Katherine M. Crowe, titled “This Is the Oppressor’s Language Yet I Need It to Talk to You: Native American Name Authorities at the University of Denver,” focuses on proposing a “middle way” between non-native LIS practitioners and PWIs (predominately white institutions) that includes developing MOUs (memorandums of understanding) as well as name authorities for individuals affiliated with the university.⁴ In the case of individuals, Elzi and Crowe discuss their work on representing local Native communities including the surrounding Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples and Native faculty affiliated with the present or past history of the university. One example includes the case of Owl Woman, a Cheyenne woman married to a white trader and mother to George Bent, a Cheyenne warrior, confederate soldier, and interpreter, also known by the name Ho-my-ike in Cheyenne. In both cases, the Library of Congress name authority file for each inadequately represents Ho-my-ike and Owl Woman despite numerous accounts detailing their various names. In the case of Owl Woman, no authority record exists and the record for Ho-my-ike only shows his Anglicized name, George Bent, without mention of his Cheyenne name.

Alongside the Elzi and Crowe piece, the chapter “Cataloging Kurdistan: Imagining Liberated Geographies,” written by Heather K. Hughes, represents the only article in this book that specifically addresses geographic names and authority name practices. Geographic names are another component of authority name control that most clearly illustrates the tension between who defines a place, who acknowledges a place, and how authority control can either erase that tension or overlook it. Hughes analyzes the issue of how current subject headings for “majority-Kurdish areas of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey . . . erase Kurdistan and Kurdish geographies.”⁵ By inviting Kurdish scholars to consult on Kurdish representation, Hughes centers the ethical consideration of a community divided over the years by wars, division of land, and overall erasure.

Most notably the topic of self-determination takes center stage as authors in part 3, which contains the largest number of chapters of the entire book, bring forth critiques of the creation and use of identifiers for gender identities, variances, and transgender experiences. These writers lead readers through complex and challenging issues, from deadnaming and undisputed transphobia to the nuances of gendered and nongendered language. Many of these discussions refer back to the recent report by the PCC Ad Hoc Task Group on Gender in Name Authority Records. The first article carries a powerful response from Kalani Adolpho titled “Who Asked

⁴ Erin Elzi and Katherine M. Crowe, “This Is the Oppressor’s Language Yet I Need It to Talk to You: Native American Name Authorities at the University of Denver,” in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 71.

⁵ Heather K. Hughes, “Cataloging Kurdistan: Imagining Liberated Geographies,” in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 99.

You? Consent, Self-Determination, and the Report of the PCC Ad Hoc Task Group on Gender in Name Authority Records.” Adolpho calls attention to the shortcomings of the instructions, which seem to demonstrate a “fundamental misunderstanding about how gender diverse people ‘explicitly disclose’ [their] gender identities.”⁶ Hale Polebaum-Freeman’s article, “Violent Cis-terms: Identifying Transphobia in Library of Congress Name Authority Records,” also pushes with full force for the reader to recognize that while transgender people continue to face death threats and murder in real life, LIS bibliographic systems and practices also contribute to their historical and potentially physical harm. By acknowledging this violence, catalogers can “confront their own nature . . . [and affirm] the potential to reduce the violence experienced by transgender individuals.”⁷

While previous authors considered the impact of past and current practices, the authors in part 4 actually invite readers to think ahead and beyond present-day realities. Ruth Kitchin Tillman warns readers that despite the promises of linked data, including its extensible structures; diverse representation through data modeling with RDF (Resource Description Framework); and sophisticated access methods, these changes also carry heavy burdens for practitioners and users alike. For example, Kitchin Tillman points out that while linked data facilitates a multiplicity of authorities, this does not in turn guarantee a broader representation and prioritization of excluded people and stories. In addition, given the prevalence of “white supremacist, patriarchal practices,” Kitchin Tillman warns that LIS practitioners using or seeking to use linked data technologies must remain vigilant against exploitation of data and the information found within these newly exposed collections.

The last part of the book includes one of the few pieces discussing archival work centered on name authorities. Alexis A. Antracoli and Katy Rawdon in their article “What’s in a Name? Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia,” discuss the work of their group Archivists 4 Black Lives Philadelphia (A4BLiP), which provides support to local community-based archives. As archivists, Antracoli and Rawdon witnessed a lack of unique names and disambiguated name authorities representing Black people in archival collections. Additionally, archivists do not typically participate in cataloging programs and often carry on long-standing harmful practices that privilege “certain names of [creators and subjects] over others.”⁸ As a result, for over a year, A4BLiP has focused on developing assessment metrics and tools for better description and naming of Black people. When considering conversations around new technologies for linked data, the absence and lack of attention toward underrepresented groups such as Black individuals

⁶ Kalani Adolpho, “Who Asked You? Consent, Self-Determination, and the Report of the PCC Ad Hoc Task Group on Gender in Name Authority Records,” in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 127.

⁷ Hale Polebaum-Freeman, “Violent Cis-terms: Identifying Transphobia in Library of Congress Name Authority Records,” in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 175.

⁸ Alexis A. Antracoli and Katy Rawdon, “What’s in a Name? Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia and the Impact of Names and Name Authorities in Archival Description,” in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 322.

in archival collection demonstrates that more work must be done toward equity and visibility around name authorities for use with archival collections.

The last article in the collection, “Creating Multilingual and Multiscript Name Authority Records: A Case Study in Meeting the Needs of Inuit Language Speakers in Nunavut,” by Carol Rigby and Riel Gallant, tackles an important underlying issue: the constant and still overwhelming Anglo-centric dominance found in authority systems and authority records. Despite calls from groups such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ 2009 statement that recommends addressing the needs and conveniences of users over that of the cataloger, incorporating multilingualism or decentering the English language does not come easily. Similar to other writers that question the centrality of the English language in LIS, Rigby and Gallant detail their efforts to achieve true multilingualism despite hurdles in authority control. These include challenges such as previous practices of anglicizing or transliterating Inuktitut names instead of retaining the original syllabic form. The issue of agency also comes up when managing names that followed “bureaucratic structures, [but] that did not necessarily equate to [a person’s] self-identification.”⁹

In conclusion, the title and field-specific content of this book, *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Records*, does beg the question of whom this book is for. For obvious reasons this book offers many lessons and insights into information and knowledge management in the fields of libraries, archives, and museums useful for catalogers and metadata practitioners. Additionally each chapter can function as core reading for all LIS students, especially given the often limited number of course offerings on ethics-centered LIS practices. Beyond the LIS community the examples and data in each article provide entry points for researchers or faculty looking to teach why, when, and how much metadata permeates our everyday interactions with information. In particular, this book would benefit faculty and scholars studying the representation of gender identities in control authority datasets, perspectives on indigenous information needs, tension between privacy and acknowledgment, and issues around race and white supremacy in cultural heritage collections. Finally, it should be noted that the chapters in this book also provide valuable observations for library project managers, information technology departments in libraries and proprietary software developing companies, and cultural heritage institution directors. Each person carries an obligation toward ethical considerations in their everyday work. Luckily, we now have this book to turn to.

⁹ Carol Rigby and Riel Gallant, “Creating Multilingual and Multiscript Name Authority Records: A Case Study in Meeting the Needs of Inuit Language Speakers in Nunavut,” in Sandberg, *Ethical Questions*, 363.

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