



Cataloguing Code of Ethics

WHELF Metadata & Cataloguing Group
WHELF Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Group

WHELF Official Statement of Endorsement

The Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELF) is proud to endorse the Cataloguing Code of Ethics that was developed by the Joint Steering Committee under the auspices of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in January 2021. This year it was reassessed by our experts and found to have stood the test of a rapidly changing socio-political environment.

We strongly recommend that each WHELF member institution formally adopts the Cataloguing Code of Ethics within their daily practices and procedures. WHELF stands firmly with the crucial role that libraries play in supporting a transparent and inclusive experience for library users throughout Wales, acknowledging the importance and value of our diverse communities.

What is the Cataloguing Code of Ethics?

The working definition of *Cataloguing Ethics*, as agreed upon by the Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee, is as follows:

“Principles and values that provide an intentional decision-making framework for those who work in Cataloguing or metadata positions.”

The Cataloguing Code of Ethics is a document that provides guidance to library cataloguers to define principles that allow us to approach the task of cataloguing/describing resources with a heightened awareness of social, cultural, technological, and linguistic issues. The data that underpins the content of library catalogues is often historical in nature and reflects the prevailing attitudes and norms of the time in which it was created - including expressions of racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of unchallenged bias. Library cataloguing records can contain harmful language and images that both reflect poorly on the library and its associated institution, but more importantly can leave library users feeling othered, unwelcome and even distressed.

It is also important to acknowledge that some of the terms and descriptions currently in use may, over time, come to be viewed as inappropriate or potentially harmful. As language and societal understandings evolve, it may become necessary to revise these terms or to include clear warnings to provide appropriate context and minimise the risk of causing offence.

Dealing with the weight of historical intolerance is not the work of a moment, but a project (or multiple projects) that will take years to unpick. The Cataloguing Code of Ethics offers cataloguers a sound starting place to begin these monumental tasks and to start making a positive impact now.

Good Practice Case Studies

There are many ways the Cataloguing Code of Ethics can be implemented in a library service. Here are some examples of WHELF member institutions who have already used the Code of Ethics to good effect...

Case Study One: National Library of Wales

Primary Statements of Ethical Principles Involved

1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9

Problem Statement/Situation Background

The National Library of Wales's catalogue contains thousands of records describing works that may include content considered harmful, offensive, or distressing to individuals or groups. These materials reflect historical attitudes, language, and perspectives that may no longer align with contemporary values.

Solutions

The Library is committed to acknowledging this context while upholding its role as a custodian of the historical record. As part of this commitment, the Library is actively working to identify and tag such records in a clear and consistent manner. This approach enables users to make informed decisions about the material they access and helps to mitigate potential harm, while ensuring that the integrity of the historical record is preserved.

By taking these steps, the Library aims to create a more inclusive, transparent, and responsible catalogue that recognises the impact of harmful content and responds to the needs of all users.

Case Study Two: Cardiff University

Primary Statements of Ethical Principles Involved

1, 2, 3, 4, 10

Problem Statement/Situation Background

Cardiff University Library Services were aware of problems of language, representation and inclusivity within some Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) used within the library catalogue. This is a common legacy issue for university libraries, where terminology has been used historically and may not have been updated to reflect current understanding and awareness of race equity issues. However, the library service was uncertain to what extent these were used within the library catalogue and the potential harm they might be causing. There was also not enough staff time available to investigate the issue.

Solutions

A temporary project cataloguer post was created using HEFCW (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales) Race Equality funding to determine the extent of language, representation, and inclusivity issues within subject headings in the library catalogue and identify solutions to create a more inclusive and accessible catalogue for all library users.

The project was conducted primarily through qualitative research; engaging with relevant documentation and existing projects to understand the current climate, known problems and potential solutions proposed by information professionals and similar institutions. This was followed by a scoping exercise to locate harmful subject headings within the University library catalogue and

determine the scale of the issue. Remedial actions appropriate to the needs of and resources available were proposed and then enacted. These included replacing and updating terms where possible using normalization rules for bulk changes, and altering discovery layer settings, via display normalisation rules, for subject headings where no LCSH and/or MeSH alternative existed. Monthly and annual sensitivity reviews were established and a statement on harmful language added to the library website and catalogue.

The project was written up in two articles for publication within *Catalogue & Index*, in order to share methods within the wider library community:

<https://journals.cilip.org.uk/catalogue-and-index/article/view/719>

<https://journals.cilip.org.uk/catalogue-and-index/article/view/720>

Case Study Three: UWTSD

Primary Statements of Ethical Principles Involved

1,2,3,4,6,7,9,10

Problem Statement/Situation Background

When the Code of Ethics was made public in January 2021, metadata staff and the wider team at UWTSD quickly took the decision to adopt the code, to make the way that we make decisions in our work more transparent.

Solution

Firstly, we discussed the code amongst our cataloguing team. Most of the statements already reflected what we do as a matter of course, as professional cataloguers, but we made sure we were familiar with all its contents, and wanted to try and ensure that everything we do takes them into account.

We wanted to let our users know that there is an underlying set of principles which govern the way that records are displayed, and which allow users to locate the information they need. The way we present records to enable this isn't random or subjective.

However, we felt that the Code document itself was not quite user-friendly enough to be part of our public-facing information, so we set about shortening it.

We felt that much of the detail of who the Cataloguing Steering Committee were and how they were formed wasn't really necessary for a public document, and we could include a link to the full version if anyone was interested in finding out more.

As well as shortening the "Background", we shortened the sections on "Definitions" and "Scope". Our feeling was that the shorter the document, the more likely users were to read it, and the more impact it would have.

The **Statements of Ethical Principles** we kept in full, as this is the core of the code and the section that we want users to understand.

The abridged code was endorsed by our Library Leadership Team. We also had it translated into Welsh.

It now sits on our website as one of Libraries and Learning Resources' policies:

<https://digitalservices.uwtسد.ac.uk/library/strategies-and-policies/>

One example of the way that we are taking our ethical responsibilities seriously is that we have added a statement of harmful language to our catalogue (particularly with regard to subject headings), and have invited users to contact us if they find any areas which they feel could be improved.

CC0 Statement

Further information: <https://creativecommons.org/public-domain/cc0/>

Further Resources

Below are additional resources to support the adoption and implementation of the Cataloguing Code of Ethics.

- WHELF: <https://whelf.ac.uk/>
- Code of Ethics (Final Version): https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IBz7nXQPfr3U1P6Xiar9cLAKzoNX_P9fq7eHvzfSlZ0/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.vtdt667wn9cc
- Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee: <https://sites.google.com/view/cataloging-ethics/home>
- Aberystwyth University Inclusive Language in Library Metadata Statement: <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/is/regulations/metadata/>
- Cardiff University statement on harmful language: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/documents/2867267-statement-on-harmful-language-in-the-library-catalogue>
- National Library of Wales Equality and Diversity: <https://www.library.wales/about-nlw/about-us/governance/equality-and-diversity>
- Writing about ethnicity statement: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/writing-about-ethnicity/>
- Homosaurus Vocabulary: <https://homosaurus.org/>
- Chew Inclusive Terminology Glossary: <https://itg.nls.uk/wiki/Introduction>

Questions?

Please see the dedicated pages for the relevant WHELF Groups to find the current Chairs, who would be happy to take your queries. Alternatively, you can contact the WHELF Development Officer at: <https://whelf.ac.uk/contact-us/>

- WHELF Metadata & Cataloguing Group: <https://whelf.ac.uk/whelf-groups/metadata/>
- WHELF Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Group: <https://whelf.ac.uk/whelf-groups/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-edi/>

Social Media post

WHELF is proud to announce the official endorsement of the Cataloguing Code of Ethics. This ground-breaking guidance facilitates a more transparent and inclusive experience for library users throughout Wales, acknowledging the importance and value of our diverse communities.

