

You Want Me to Catalog What? Practical Strategies for Cataloging Insensitive/Offensive Material

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Abstract

As an experienced original serials cataloger with the Cooperative Serials Program of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (CONSER), one who works extensively with special collections materials, I have often been asked to catalog materials replete with content many would deem offensive. These materials include magazines featuring sexually explicit text and images, as well as propaganda published by hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and other American Nazi organizations. I have had to establish practices for handling these materials that minimize my colleagues' exposure to them and protect my own emotional health.

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I have a couple of personality traits that I believe make me well-suited to my work as a serialist. I love solving mysteries and learning about new things; the more obscure the better. I am fortunate that I catalog for the Duke University Libraries, where the collections have presented me with plenty of opportunities to do both. Many of these opportunities have come from cataloging materials in the David M. Rubenstein

Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Their technical services department does not have a dedicated serials cataloger, so 25 percent of my work hours are allocated to serving their serials cataloging needs. The work I have done for them has proven to be rewarding and mostly an utter delight. However, elements of that work have set me on a less-than-joyous journey.

This journey began with me sitting at my desk, minding my own cataloging business. One of the special collections monographic catalogers sidled up to my desk and asked in a very quiet voice, "How do you feel about pornography?"

While I was attempting to form a response to her question, she turned bright red and added, "I mean about cataloging it of course."

This resulted in my first venture into cataloging what might be considered offensive material. *Screw* had ended up in the Rubenstein collection as part of Edwin and Terry Murray's donated comic book collection due to the fact that many of the magazine's covers had been drawn by R. Crumb and other counterculture comic artists. Aware that some of my colleagues might be more offended by the content than intrigued by the cataloging challenge as I was, I knew I needed to make some decisions about how best to handle this material before someone rolled a book truck full of it up to my desk. Luckily, it had all been bound into standard plain library bindings, decreasing the chance of collateral damage that might have been caused by accidental exposure to the material. It was only once the truck arrived that I realized I had overlooked the obvious fact that, plain binding or not, I would still have issues open on my desk in order to pull cataloging information. I was not about to take a survey of my colleagues' tolerance levels, but after some consideration, I decided it would be wise to let my colleagues know the nature of the material I was cataloging so they could choose to avoid my desk as necessary.

Next up was a succession of materials that were, shall we say, in the same genre. Having successfully cataloged *Screw* for special collections, I then reviewed a succession of Leathermen interest magazines and pulp fiction runs. These materials often lacked critical cataloging

information within the issues themselves due to the nature of their content and, in some cases, the legality of these materials at the time they were published. This meant that I needed to perform extensive online research. While scrolling through my first collectors' website, I had the sudden realization that if my computer were to freeze and/or need to be restored by information technology employees, I might be facing some serious career-endangering questions from Human Resources. Therefore, I established the habit of always letting my direct supervisor know when I was working on this material. Having proved willing to tackle the cataloging challenges inherent in material with this kind of content, the work became a regular part of my job without adding a significant amount of emotional freight to my days. I had become blasé about it. But I was not prepared for what was about to cross my desk.

The Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) donated papers and collected resources represent another significant collection in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. The SPLC collection includes serials published by hate groups across the country which have been used as evidence against them when they have been brought to trial, literally using their own words against them. Already familiar with the work of the SPLC, I was reluctant to undertake this cataloging project, knowing just how upsetting the material was likely to be. Whatever I expected, I was ill-prepared for what I saw when faced with the actual content. Some of the first titles I examined included reprints of photos of lynchings, photographs of Ku Klux Klan rallies and cross burnings, racist cartoons, articles on white race supremacy based on phrenology, Identity Church serials, and even articles asserting that the first inhabitants of the United States were white Europeans. What ultimately swayed me toward accepting the task was knowing that no matter how uncomfortable the material might make me, it was important to preserve information contained within these serials that might have been obscured if it had been cataloged as an archival collection.

I found myself revisiting and adding to my previous strategies for dealing with offensive materials. This time I informed all my colleagues

in Resource Description of the nature of the material I was working with. In addition, I placed a warning sign in the aisle in front of my workspace to hopefully prevent accidental exposure. I strictly limited how much of the material was visible on my desk at any given time. In addition to informing my supervisor of risky online research activities, I warned other area supervisors as well. My supervisor told me that if she won the lottery and ran away (her words, not mine) she wanted others in leadership roles to be able to explain why my computer had frozen on the Stormfront site. My *modus operandi* became cataloging these materials as quickly as possible to minimize the potential negative impacts of exposure to anyone and everyone.

What I was less careful to consider was my own mental health. I was suddenly exposed to a secret world of people bound together by hatred that seemed far more extensive than I had ever imagined. Unfortunate discoveries included finding that Kevin B. MacDonald, a professor of evolutionary psychology at California State University, Long Beach, was also the editor of the *Occidental Quarterly*, a racist journal. While I have never been a sunny optimist—I am English; we do not do sunny optimism—I found myself evaluating the behavior of those around me with growing suspicion. This low-level paranoia had a definite impact on my daily life, and family and friends began to notice subtle changes in my behavior. I realized that I needed to come up with strategies to protect my own wellbeing as well as that of my colleagues.

I began to schedule work on this material for just one day a week. Limiting my own exposure and interspersing this work with more pleasant tasks was crucial to avoid burning out. Working on it only one day a week also meant that I could let family and friends know ahead of time that it wasn't going to be a good day for me. Laughter has always been very effective medicine for me, and I resolved to find humor wherever I could and to laugh whenever I could. For example, serials in the collection included publications randomly sent to the SPLC by concerned citizens. One such item was a Scottish genealogy magazine dealing with family trees that just happened to have "clans," yes with

a "c," on the cover. I was told by colleagues that I developed an evil laugh I would deploy when faced with editorials in cheaply Xeroxed serials bragging about their millions of avid readers while begging for five-dollar donations that would allow them to continue to publish.

While cataloging is certainly a collaborative effort, the actual process of cataloging is a solitary endeavor. As catalogers, we work together to create records to be used not only by our own institutions but by others as well. As serials catalogers in particular, we update and add to information contained within other catalogers' records. We establish standards with our peers and mull over the fine points and the interpretive dance known as "cataloger's judgment" in places like the CONSER listserv. In other words, we consult with each other and support each other's continuing education and understanding of our collective work. That said, when actively engaged in the cataloging process—when the materials move beyond an intellectual puzzle and into the realm of having a direct emotional impact on us—we are unfortunately alone. We are a community principally of practice rather than of support.

The more I began to consider how solitary our occupation really is, the more I realized how important networking is to find and provide support for the good of our collective mental health. I set out to find other catalogers within my institution who might also be dealing with problematic materials. This proved to be the best coping strategy I found. I had consulted with colleagues before about cataloging rules and interpretations but never about the nature of the material itself. My thinking was that while I did not want to risk the emotional equilibrium of colleagues, it was likely that those already laboring in similarly dark trenches could be in need of the same kind of emotional support I felt the need for, and it turned out they were. Once we connected, we were able to provide a lifeline for each other, be it only a timely coffee break or a much-needed opportunity to vent. We could show materials to each other when we needed to consult on cataloging approaches and decisions without unduly worrying about each other's emotional health since we were all dealing with the same kind

of difficult material. We essentially were able to form our own support group and to share our strategies for coping. We were no longer working in a vacuum. We no longer had to feel that we were alone.

Several of my newly networked colleagues were working during this time on reparative cataloging of plantation materials that had been held by Duke University Libraries for decades. These materials had bibliographic records that failed to even mention enslaved peoples. I had always been taught that the goal of catalogers in creating records was objectivity. It was with this group of catalogers also engaged in cataloging problematic materials that I had my first discussions about how objectivity itself in this context was problematic and untenable.

I am a Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) CONSER level original serials cataloger. I had always endeavored to make the best records I could make, but I felt that it was time to go above and beyond. I used both Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) controlled vocabularies to best identify the literal content of the work. If an author was expressing anti-Semitic sentiments, then they received an Anti-Semitic genre heading. I added the largest number of subject headings to individual bibliographic records I have ever added for a single collection. I also made the most Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO) records, and certainly the most detailed, I ever have for a single collection. In addition, I added 752 fields to all of the bibliographic records for potential mapping projects by end users in the future. The people that created all of this hate-filled material were proud of their work and their self-perceived superiority. I felt that it fell to me to make sure they got every bit of credit they could for what they had created.

For example, when I started this project, the NACO records for the Ku Klux Klan were basically divided into two entries: Ku Klux Klan (19th century) and Ku Klux Klan (1915–). Now there are thirty-four separate NACO records, and I created half of them. I supplemented these records with every additional detail I could find such as alternative group names and founder information. It was my hope that including

this level of detail would enable catalogers and researchers to more accurately trace the relationships among these groups. I cheerfully abused the CONSER "recommended number of serial headings" when I felt it was called for and, as already stated, I made use of both LCSH and RBMS genre terms.

One thing I noticed very early on in working with hate-oriented materials was that while the writing was full of bravado, there seemed to be a great reluctance among the writers to clearly identify themselves. Again, I felt strongly that they should receive all the credit for their work. Cue more extensive research and sometimes acts of desperation to be able to differentiate them from others in the name authority file with the same name. What is the point in being a Grand Dragon of the Flaming Sword if nobody knows it? While some of these NACO records were pre-existing, I added any additional information I had uncovered to them and went about creating a whole lot more of them for any person or group where I had enough information to do so.

Practice and awareness led to focusing on consideration for others, self-care, finding and giving support to other catalogers, and focusing on this larger purpose to carry me through whenever my energy flagged. I have developed emotional coping mechanisms that center around practicing radical empathy toward the targets of hate-oriented material, in large part by creating bibliographic and NACO records that clearly identify its creators while exposing the nature/intent of their work and their connections to creators of affiliated/associated work. The work of cataloging goes beyond just recording the data to the best of our ability. And it is important to remember that subject headings can serve as warnings for users as well as enhance the output of search engines.

Of course, I understand what works for one person may not work for another, but we need to bear in mind as a community that we are inevitably affected by the materials we work with just as the users who will be accessing this material will be. I think it is also important to point out that those who work at smaller institutions with fewer

catalogers may have fewer options for support. An inter-institutional community of support would help to address this. The need for such a community in addition to practice seems obvious and long overdue to me. Building that community could prove crucial to the wellbeing of us all.

In my presentation, I attempted to open the floor for a frank discussion of not only the need for such a community but what form it might take. As often happens at conferences, serendipitous synergy occurred in that one of the Vision sessions and a poster presentation touched on similar themes, suggesting that this need is being recognized more widely. Perhaps the answer might be as simple as starting with a version of PCCLIST@LISTSERV.LOC.GOV (the PCC discussion list) which allows participants to share information and discuss general cooperative cataloging issues. This new listserv, with appropriate warnings of course, would provide participants a place to discuss the disturbing nature of some of the material they catalog and share strategies for coping with it. A peer-to-peer network of support as opposed to the usual mentoring we see in our libraries could also help to address this need.

As John Donne might have written if he had been a librarian, "No cataloger is an island." It is time for us to build bridges between catalogers and establish a community that goes beyond practice to provide the real support many of us need.

Contributor Notes

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