

Guidelines for Addressing Outdated or Offensive Subject Terms

Database Improvement and Discoverability Policy Team

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Background: Due to the continuing inability of the Library of Congress to change LCSH headings “Aliens” to “Noncitizens” and “Illegal aliens” to “Undocumented immigrants” (see the original [Library of Congress March 22, 2016 decision to change the headings](#) and the June 13, 2016 Library Journal article, “[Library of Congress Drops Illegal Alien Subject Heading, Provokes Backlash Legislation](#)”, for more information) and a request made to DIAD for guidance on this issue by a group of OhioLINK libraries, DIAD created this document to present OhioLINK libraries with options for addressing outdated or offensive subject terms at the local level alongside their potential effects on the shared Central Catalog. The DIAD Policy Team provides these guidelines as optional actions that individual OhioLINK institutions can undertake in their local catalogs if they wish to do so. The [Report of the SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH “Illegal aliens”](#) (June 19, 2020) was particularly helpful in considering options, and should be consulted for more detailed information before planning any changes locally.

Based on the *Report of the SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH “Illegal aliens”*, we have identified three basic strategies for implementing a solution:

1. Replace offensive term(s) with updated term(s) in bibliographic record(s)
2. Insert updated term(s) as local heading(s) into bibliographic records so both old and new terms are indexed and visible
3. Replace offensive term(s) in catalog index with updated term(s) and display updated term(s) in discovery layer without removing offensive term(s) from bibliographic record(s)

Below are considerations for each option’s effect on the Central Catalog to take into account before implementing locally followed by an explanation of how subject headings are indexed and displayed in Central.¹

Option 1: Replace offensive term(s) with updated term(s) in bibliographic record(s)

This option gives the greatest flexibility to individual libraries. They can make local determinations about terms that best meet the needs of their communities. Individual libraries would make decisions and carry out any necessary editing and maintenance.

Notable Considerations:

¹ The options and recommendations outlined below could also potentially be applied to other 6xx Subject Added Entries deemed problematic by a local institution, such as 600 or 651 headings.

- The library would need to be vigilant about new cataloging, particularly batch loading records, to prevent the reintroduction of the offensive term to the local catalog
- It is possible that records would be contributed to OhioLINK Central Catalog with a valid LCSH removed. See [Matching Bibliographic Records at the Central Site](#) and [Changing an Existing INN-Reach Catalog Record](#) (login may be required).
- No changes at the OhioLINK Central Catalog level if using the following MARC fields: 650_4 | 650_7 | 653 | 690

Option 2: Insert updated term(s) as local heading(s) into bibliographic records so both old and new terms are indexed and visible

This option keeps valid LCSH, which could be updated at a future time more easily than if the heading had been completely removed. Individual libraries would make decisions and carry out any necessary editing and maintenance.

Notable Considerations:

- The offensive term would continue to be indexed and displayed
- The library would need to be vigilant about new cataloging, particularly batch loading records, to continue to add preferred terms to the local catalog
- Please use standard MARC21 encoding to apply local terms
- No changes at the OhioLINK Central Catalog level if using the following MARC fields: 650_4 | 650_7 | 653 | 690

Option 3: Replace offensive term(s) in catalog index with updated term(s) and display updated term(s) in discovery layer without removing offensive term(s) from bibliographic record(s)

Villanova added code to the VuFind discovery layer to adjust the index and display of “illegal aliens.” As they say, “By solving the problem once, we can introduce a system that will automatically keep the problem solved over time, without any ongoing record-editing maintenance.”

Notable considerations:

- The MARC data is not actually changed, so this solution is system-specific
- Each library would have to develop and implement solution locally, depending on which tool(s) they use
- No changes at the OhioLINK Central Catalog level

Display and Indexing of Subject Headings in the OhioLINK Central Catalog

The OhioLINK central catalog works on the master record principle. Records are loaded according to [matching algorithm](#) and library [load priority](#). Tier 1 OhioLINK libraries, those that catalog using both LC and MESH, have priority for contributing master records. Tier 2 and lower tier records may become master records if no Tier 1 record is contributed to Central.

The central catalog currently displays all 650 headings with a second indicator 0 (LC) or 2 (MeSH). It also displays all genre/form headings in the 655, regardless of indicator. And It displays the source code in subfield 2. 650 tags are indexed in subject and word indexes, and the 655 is included in the word index. For these alternative headings to be visible and indexed in the central catalog, they must be added using the 650 or 655 tags.

OhioLINK libraries, at this point, are requested to comply with MARC standards when applying subject analysis. Only valid Library of Congress headings should be used with 650 second indicator 0. Only valid MeSH headings should be used with 650 indicator 2. Uncontrolled genre/form headings can be entered into the 655, indicator 4. These terms are indexed and displayed in OhioLINK central.

Local terms can be encoded in several ways. Subject access points can be coded with second indicator 4 (Source not specified) or a combination of second indicator 7 (source specified) with the subfield 2 containing the [Subject Heading and Term Source Codes](#), which give the option of |2 local. In addition, the rules in the MARC standard clearly state that tag 653 (Index Term-Uncontrolled) is to be used to record terms that are not derived from controlled subject heading lists. Some libraries also use a 690 for local subject terms. OhioLINK does not currently index or display these fields.

This report recommends that, at this time, OhioLINK libraries continue to follow established cataloging standards for the use of alternative subject headings. This includes the use of the 653 tag. At the local library level, libraries are free to add, change or delete subject terms as they see fit, and update or change local authority files as they see fit. All data sent to the OhioLINK catalog must continue to adhere to national cataloging standards for consistency. Split files will cause confusion for catalog users. This will keep displays consistent.

If at some point, OhioLINK libraries feel that the central catalog should be reconfigured to remove or replace what are deemed obsolete or offensive subject headings, they will need to provide the technological support necessary for the conversion process and for the ongoing workflow processes.

Further Reading & Resources

- [Report of the SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH "Illegal aliens"](#)
- Orbis Cascade Alliance Cataloging Standing Group's discussion paper on "[Providing alternative subject headings for controversial Library of Congress subject headings in the Alliance shared ILS](#)" (December 2019) and "[Recommendation to Implement an Alliance-wide Alternative to the LCSH "Illegal Aliens" Subject Terminology](#)" (June 2020)
- Stanford University Special Collections and University Archives' "[Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Cataloging and Archival Description](#)"
- Sunshine State Digital Network's "[Inclusive Metadata & Conscious Editing Resources](#)"
- UCLA's William Andrews Clark Memorial Library "[Statement on Cataloging](#)"

- Villanova University's Falvey Memorial Library blog post, "[FALVEY STAFF MEMBERS WORK TOGETHER TO 'CHANGE THE SUBJECT' ON THE TERM 'ILLEGAL ALIENS'](#)"