The Invisible Maintenance of Bibliographic Data

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Many people conceptualize bibliographic data as static. To find a book in a library, all one needs is fixed information such as title, author and subject. But this data lives and evolves: author names change through
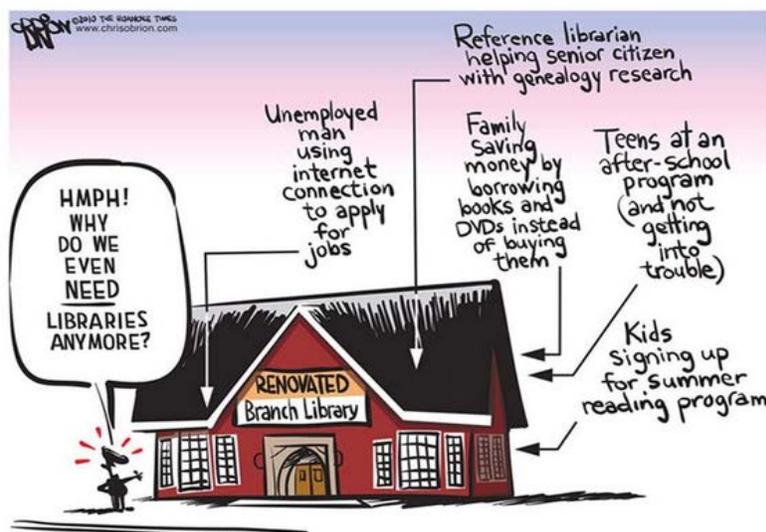

Figure 1. Political cartoon by Chris O'Brion, originally published in The Roanoke Times, 2010.

marriage,[1] or gender changes.[2] Titles change with new updated editions.[3] Even subject headings evolve, such as the recent proposed change of LCSH from "illegal aliens" to "unauthorized immigration."[4] As custodians of these resources, librarians have spent years maintaining bibliographic data. Yet librarianship is still viewed in terms of reference services and resources (see Figure 1 as an example). The data maintenance that underlies libraries—without which those resources and services would be unavailable— is invisible.

This alternative proposal aims to make librarians' maintenance work explicitly visible. Although bibliographic data maintenance has occurred throughout library history, catalog cards—an immediately recognizable form of bibliographic data from the 20th century—explicitly reveal maintenance through hand-written corrections and annotations (see Figure 2 as an example). As an allegory to traditional conceptualizations of maintenance and repair work, catalog cards will be compiled and "patched" together with thread and string, making connections between two forms of traditionally invisible, taken-for-granted maintenance work: textile repair and library bibliographic data. In the same way a mother might patch a hole in her child's jeans, librarians have patched missing or incorrect data in library catalogs, without attribution or acknowledgement of value. References to traditionally feminine maintenance like sewing also raise questions about the stereotypes of librarianship as a feminine profession and its influence on obfuscating data labor. Instead of a traditional academic presentation, this exhibit is intended for display in a prominent location for the duration of the conference so that all attendees can visualize this important maintenance work.
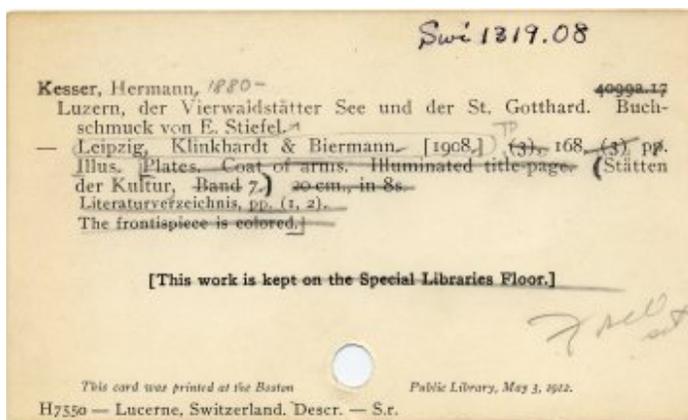

Figure 2. A catalog card printed by the Boston Public Library on May 3, 1922. This is a discarded card from the Harvard College Library. From http://www.libraryhistorybuff.org/catalog-cards.htm

Notes

1 See for example S. M. Tescione, (1988). "A woman's name: Implications for publication, citation, and tenure." *Educational Researcher 27*(8): 38–42; D. B. Bennett and P. Williams, (2006). "Name authority challenges for indexing and abstracting databases." *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice 1*(1). Retrieved from http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/viewArticle/7/86; L. J. Pellack and L. O. Kappmeyer, (2011). "The ripple effect of women's name changes in indexing, citation, and authority control." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science 62*(3): 440–448. doi:10.1002/asi.21469

2 K. J. Thompson, (2016). "More than a name: a content analysis of name authority records for authors who self-identify as trans." *Library Resources & Technical Services 60*(3): 140 – 155. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/kelly_thompson/12/

3 M. B. Molto, (2013). "Identifying significant changes in serials with title changes in the recognition of new works." *Library Resources & Technical Services 57*(4): 192-212. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/1443490723?accountid=14214

4 L. Peet, (June 15, 2016). "Library of Congress Drops Illegal Alien Subject Heading, Provokes Backlash Legislation." *Library Journal 141*(11): 12-13 Available at http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/06/legislation/library-of-congress-drops-illegal-alien-subject-heading-provokes-backlash-legislation