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THE MISSISSIPPI DIGITAL LIBRARY'S CIVIL RIGHTS THESAURUS:

An Evolving Authority Control Tool for Civil Rights-Related Headings in Metadata Records

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History of the Civil Rights Thesaurus

The online Civil Rights Thesaurus (CRT) at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) had its beginnings in the digitization of civil rights materials in the university's McCain Library and Archives in the early 2000s. The materials included oral history interviews, letters, newspaper clippings, photographs, and other items from the rich history of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, including materials from the Freedom Summer of 1964. In addition to the creation of digitized images, making these materials available online as the Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive included the formulation of descriptive records using Dublin Core metadata and the development of a controlled vocabulary for subject access.

The Civil Rights Thesaurus was conceived as a list of subject headings appropriate to the subject of civil rights, along with the name headings used in metadata records for the digital objects making up the archive. At first, metadata records were created and subject headings were assigned by staff in the USM Libraries' Digital Laboratory, but catalog librarians were responsible for maintaining the official list of authorized terms used in the records. *The Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH) was the source for most of the CRT headings; a supplementary list of locally created subject terms that "filled in" areas where LCSH was lacking in specificity was also added (Graham, 2002). Some subject headings that began as locally used terms, such as "African American schools," later became authorized LC subject headings.

With the birth of the Mississippi Digital Library (MDL) in 2003, the Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive became part of a multi-institution

effort to digitize civil rights resources. Like the USM digital archive, the digital library was established with the aid of an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant. The MDL originally included images and descriptions of civil rights-related materials from the University of Southern Mississippi, Delta State University, the University of Mississippi, Tougaloo College, Jackson State University, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Other institutions have since become members. Each institution is responsible for the creation of its own descriptive metadata, which appears in a public interface on the individual libraries' Web sites and is also integrated into the ContentDMTM database of MDL records at the University of Southern Mississippi. However, responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the official list of CRT headings and authority records has remained with catalogers at USM, who review the name and subject headings in metadata contributed to the digital library by other institutions and add selected headings from these records to the CRT. In 2007, USM catalog librarians also began sharing in responsibility for the creation of descriptive metadata records for digitized materials from the McCain Library and Archives, including the assignment of appropriate headings.

Challenges

The thesaurus expanded in scope and usage as other MDL member institutions began to create metadata records for their digital objects. One significant change from the early days has involved the inclusion of precoordinate Library of Congress subject headings—i.e., subject heading character strings consisting of headings plus subdivisions. Originally, the CRT was

intended to be a list of postcoordinate headings. For example, a metadata record would contain separate subject headings for “Mississippi,” “History,” and “Civil rights movements,” as opposed to a string such as “Civil rights movements—Mississippi—History.” Non-catalogers’ responsibility for the initial assignment of subject headings was a factor in the decision to use postcoordinate headings, as was the popularity of keyword searching (Graham, 2002). It was acknowledged that the loss of specificity inherent in postcoordinate headings could affect searching effectiveness in some cases. The subsequent shift of responsibility for creating subject headings in USM’s metadata records to catalog librarians, and the digital library’s addition of metadata records from other institutions that contained detailed, specific precoordinate subject strings, resulted in a policy change that allows precoordinate headings. Today the MDL records, and the thesaurus, contain a mix of pre- and postcoordinate subjects.

From the beginning, an important component of the thesaurus has been the authority records that correspond to the list of name and subject terms. The Library of Congress’s authority file serves as the source for authority records that are loaded

into the USM Libraries’ local authority file. Authority records for name headings that are not already represented in LC’s name authority file are either submitted to the Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO) by USM catalogers who have received NACO training, or are created as local records in USM’s file. As described below, these authority records are made available in MARC format for use by Mississippi Digital Library participants. The budget and staff reductions that have become all too familiar to librarians can make finding the time and resources for detailed authority work something of a challenge, but work with the CRT continues.

Organization of the CRT

To facilitate the use of the CRT, the list of headings is made available on the USM Libraries’ Web site in two forms. The main Web display is list of the headings for MDL participants to use as a quick reference tool in the creation of descriptive metadata for their digital collections (Figure 1), with a clickable alphabetical index. Cross-references are included in the list (see the reference below from Advocate (Jackson, Miss.) to Jackson advocate).



Figure 1: Web display: alphabetical list of CRT headings showing cross reference

As noted above, some local subject headings had to be created to cover areas where LCSH lacked in specificity. One of these headings is Trials (Civil rights) (see the display in Figure 2). This heading does not exist in the LC authority file,

but there is an obvious need for it in a collection of civil rights-related materials. The designation “local only” in the thesaurus indicates headings for which a local authority record was created in USM’s online authority file.



Figure 2: *Web display: Alphabetical list of CRT headings showing locally created name and subject headings*

The introductory screen for the alphabetical list contains a link to a display of MARC authority records for the thesaurus headings (Figure 3). This Microsoft Excel™ display is generated from a Microsoft Access™ database that contains copies of the authority records for CRT headings from the USM Libraries' online authority file; this feature enables MDL

participants to use the authority records for constructing headings in their metadata records. The sample below shows a Library of Congress record from the LC authority file (#1), a locally created name authority record from the USM Libraries' catalog (#2), and a NACO record submitted by a USM cataloger to the Library of Congress (#3).

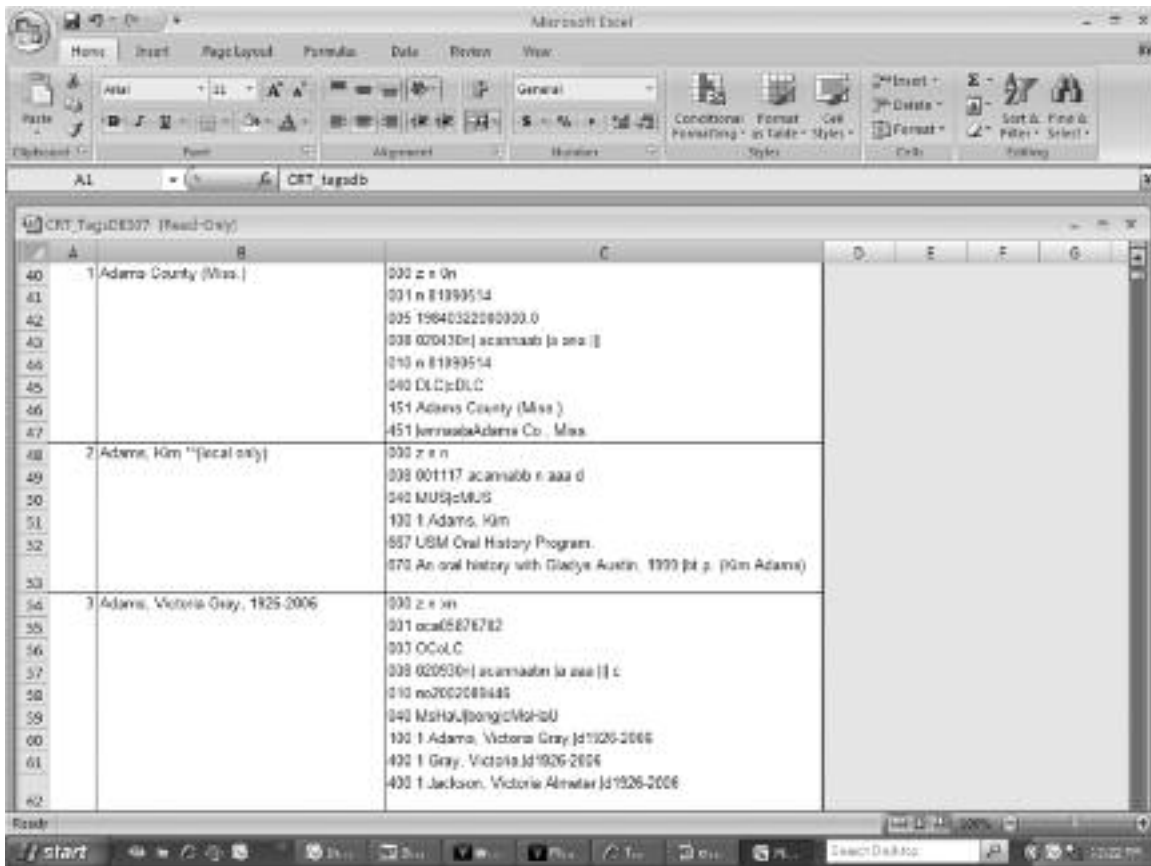


Figure 3: Web display: MARC authority records for CRT headings

Civil Rights Thesaurus headings in the public view of a Mississippi Digital Library metadata record from a contributing institution are shown

in Figure 4. The subject terms can include personal names as well as topical and geographic headings.



Figure 4: CRT headings in use in a metadata record from an MDL member library

Conclusion

Building on its civil rights beginnings, the Mississippi Digital Library continues to expand and include new participants and materials in more diverse subject areas. The library now contains images and metadata records from eleven institutions. It is hoped that the Civil Rights Thesaurus will assist MDL members, and

any other libraries interested in providing access to civil rights-related materials, in creating metadata for their digital collections. The thesaurus can be accessed at http://www.lib.usm.edu/techserv/cat/tools/crm_index. More information on the Mississippi Digital Library is available at <http://www.msdl.org/cdm4/about.php>.

Reference

Graham, Suzanne. (2002, Summer). Creating Low Stress and High Impact Metadata for the Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive. *Mississippi Libraries* 66(2), 41-43.