LCSH Tracing Essay: Abortion

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In *Foundations of Library and Information Science* (2007), Richard Rubin states that “Classification puts subjects into the context of disciplines” (pg. 229). It follows, then, that the more disciplines a subject affects—the more polemic and complex it becomes—the more it will need the reigns of a system that uses a controlled vocabulary (to organize its parameters, of course!). The subject headings in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* perform this very function; they “list subjects outside the disciplinary context, so a search on horses retrieves items about horses regardless of their disciplinary context” (Rubin, 2007, pg. 229). Therefore, as subjects grow into subject headings they drag their interdisciplinary equipage, all their intellectual and cultural capital, the legions of ideas and leagues of thoughts that have been accompanying it since it was a wee subject.

The obvious hypothesis to draw is that the number of subject headings in the *Library of Congress Subject Heading* under Abortion increased as the subject fractured, bifurcated, and went through polemic mitosis. As the controversy surrounding the subject of Abortion generated articles, exposés, books; as the state and federal courts wrangled over propriety; as the physicians and litigants joined forces against the medical review boards; as the women became revolutionaries or outlaws, or both; as the right brain and the left brain of this country attempted to congeal the subject of Abortion, it follows that the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* would reflect this momentum and contain increased numbers of subject headings for Abortion. And, that is exactly what has happened: as Abortion ran its course through the history of this country there were more and more ways to retrieve items with the subject heading, Abortion.
In *When Abortion Was a Crime* by Leslie J. Reagan (1997) the author delineates several key elements concerning the history of Abortion in the U.S. from the late 19th Century to Roe vs. Wade in 1973. Actually, the subtitle of Reagan’s book is “Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973,” and the book’s locus is the intersection of these three interests, “This study points to the importance of studying the social history of sexuality as well as the medical and legal discourse about it” (Reagan, 1997, pg. 7). Reagan’s research targets the social history and criminalization of abortion by examining the importance it held in daily life. She states that “through the 1920s at least, working-class women did not make a distinction between contraception and abortion” (1997, pg. 6). This leads one to believe that while controversial, the topic of abortion did not generate much hubbub because it was a secret, though prevalent, procedure.

The populace didn’t talk about abortion because there was really nothing to talk about: women had abortions. In fact, “During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, abortion of early pregnancy was legal under common law” (Reagan, 1997, pg. 8). There were laws against abortions taking place before the fourth month (or the “quickening” of the fetus), but there was no laws against abortion itself; indeed, abortion was the province of a woman’s decision and “the popular ethic regarding abortion and common law were grounded in the female experience of their own bodies” (Reagan, 1997, pg. 8). If we are to believe Reagan’s assertions about the prevalent attitude toward abortion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then we can apply it to 20 century
editions. For example, an edition from 1910 should contain less terms, headings, and sub-headings than an 1920 edition; terms, headings, and sub-headings would only be added in proportion that the subject become more polemic and controversial. The examination of four years of the Library of Congress Subject Headings should answer a question of this caliber; therefore, the years 1957, 1966, 1993, and 2000 were randomly chosen to determine whether their data supported this contention.

The 1957 Library of Congress Subject Headings for Abortion readily displays the disinterest Reagan asserts. For example, the see-also heading for the subject heading of Abortion is “Medical Jurisprudence” (1957, pg.3). This means that a synonymous path of looking up Abortion is to refer to the branch of law that deals specifically with Medicine, or jurisprudence; in this context, Abortion is relegated to its function as a procedure, simple and plain, regulated from within the Medical community. Even more revealing are the class numbers supplied: “HQ 767 Medical Jurisprudence, RA1067; Obstetrical operations, RG734; Obstetrics, RG648” (1957, pg. 3). The last two class numbers guide the user to look at the section that deals specifically with birth and its precursors and sequels, or Obstetrics. Overall, there are 12 terms that relate, rather rudimentarily, to Abortion; there are 3 subject headings under Abortion as well: Abortion, Abortion (Canon law), and Abortion in Animals. And there is only one sub-heading: Compliance and sequelae (an aftermath of injury).

Was the disinterest in Abortion in 1957 due to its cursory existence, or where there other factors at play. If we are to believe Reagan’s assertions about the laissez-faire
attitude exhibited by the populace towards abortion at the beginning of the twentieth century, then we can conclude that only when Abortion became polemic or a matter or public health and controversy was it going to be reflected in the LCSH subject heading Abortion. But that is not the case, in fact, that is very far from the mark. According to Reagen, “Between 1951 and 1962, the absolute number of abortion deaths nearly doubled in this eleven-year period, from twenty-seven deaths per year in the early 1950s to fifty-one per year in the early 1960s” (1997, pg. 211). While deaths from abortions are a possibility, they only usually occur when women are forced to go “underground,” deal with unscrupulous and unlicensed abortionists, or try the procedure themselves by ingesting abortifacients or bludgeoning the fetus. Was it possible that the LCSH was purposely omitting terms, in effect, downplaying the importance of key issues because they weren’t making a significant splash in the media? The reality is that we can only conjecture, but Reagan is vehement about the fact that “demand for abortion…increased in the fifties and sixties. It certainly intensified” (1997, pg. 14).

It was with this logic in mind that the LCSH for 1966 was analyzed. Instantly, the most glaring distinction between the 1957 LCSH and the 1966 version is the absence of the term “Medical jurisprudence.” Whereas, in the 1957 edition it is the first term to appear, in the 1966 edition is does not appear. It does, however, still appear in the class number section that has already been established and can not be likely decommissioned. However, why might the term “Medical jurisprudence” disappear from the terms’ list altogether? According to the Timeline of Significant U.S. Reproductive Rights Events” created by the NorthEast Pennsylvania Planned Parenthood website, in 1965, the “U.S.
Supreme Court [found] unconstitutional the Connecticut law prohibiting birth control for married couples in Griswold v. Connecticut” (2008). And yet, this decision does not appear in the terms’ list, nor does it warrant the amplification of the terms to include, Marriage and sex, or sub-divide geographically to include the Connecticut state court’s decision. Likewise, the “Abortion History Timeline” created by the National Right to Life Organization and posted on their website details that in 1959, “The American Law Institute (ALI) proposes a model penal code for state abortion laws, legalizing abortion for reasons including the mental health or physical health of the mother” (2008). And yet, the only term in the subject heading that addresses this event is the term “Sex and law” (1966, pg. 3).

According to Katha Pollitt in her article in The Atlantic, “By the sixties the whole jerry-built structure of criminalization was crumbling, along with the ideology of gender and sexuality that lay behind it”; in addition, New York State decriminalized abortion in 1970 and “thousands of well-off women started traveling there to obtain safe abortions” (1997). As we all know it wasn’t until 1973 that “Abortion is legalized nationwide by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Roe v. Wade” (“Timeline,” 2008). This decision not only drastically reduced the number of women killed by botched abortions performed by unskilled abortionists in unsanitary and clandestine locations, it was also seen as a triumph for women’s rights at an individual level, “Legalizing abortion was a public-health triumph that for pregnant women ranked with the advent of antisepsis and antibiotics. In 1971, the year after decriminalization, the maternity-mortality rate in New
York State dropped 45 percent” (Pollitt, 1997). The 80’s were equally rife with politicians attempting to curb who gets the right to use federal funds for abortions; legislation like the Hyde Amendment (1976) made it increasingly difficult for women of a lower class or status, especially those receiving medical care through the government like Medicare, to receive abortions or obtain government help in defraying costs (“Timeline,” 2008).

In the 1993 LCSH, Abortion occupies a finite amount of space. There are 11 subject headings that contain the word or phrase Abortion, among them are “Abortion counseling, Abortion, Therapeutic, Abortion (Jewish law), and Abortion in animals” (1993, pg. 9). Under the main subject heading, Abortion, there are 6 sub-headings, and of those 6 sub-headings there are 4 that divide even further. All of the sub-headings sub-divide geographically except, “Moral and ethical aspects” and “Religious aspects” (1993, pg. 9). The aspect of geographic sub-division affords users even more chances of happening upon a subject heading of utmost utility. The first class number listed is “HQ 767-HQ767.52 (Birth Control)” hinting that the emphasis has shifted from the procedural (medical jurisprudence) to the social: the class HQ represents, “The family. Marriage. Women” (“H Social Sciences,” 2008). In the 1957 and 1966 editions of the LCSH, the class number is the same and the term that follows it is “Medical Jurisprudence”; in the 1993 edition, the phrase that follows the class number is “Birth Control”. It has taken nearly thirty years (27 exactly) for the emphasis in the subject Abortion, as a classifiable idea, to rest with women instead of with those that perform the procedure!
Likewise, the 2000 LCSH, contains 7 sub-headings under the subject heading, Abortion. Compared to the 1993 LCSH, this is an increase of one; however, all of the sub-headings sub-divide geographically. In addition, the 1993 LCSH contains 11 subject headings, words of phrases with the word Abortion, and the 2000 LCSH contains only 10 suggesting that the subject heading Abortion had somehow compacted or shrunk to displace some of the polemic density (2000, pg. 14). Moreover, the 2000 LCSH sported a new subject-heading, “Abortion in literature” (pg. 14) and, “Abortion in the press” had been sagaciously transformed, from a subject heading in the 1993 LCSH, to the sub-division, “Press coverage” in the sub-heading “Moral and ethical aspects” under the principal subject heading for Abortion. This possibly suggests that the years 1993 to 2000 were rife with notoriety, media coverage, and polemic currency concerning Abortion and ancillary aspects.

Indeed, the problem of bias in the LCSH is nothing new. There have been many critics, the most vocal among them being Sanford Berman who published Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People (1971). Berman’s monograph addressed the inherit bias in the creation of subject headings, and many of the changes in subsequent editions of the LCSH have been as a result of Berman’s advocacy. But change has been slow; in fact, in 2005 Steven Knowlton published an article in Cataloging & Classification Quarterly that examined the percentage of Berman’s suggestions that were integrated by the LCSH. Knowlton writes, “Of the 225 headings Berman suggested changes in, 88 (or 39%) have been changed almost exactly as he
suggested, while an additional 54 (or 24%) have been changed in ways that partially reflect Berman’s suggestions” (2005, pg. 128). Through perusal of the Appendix, readers of Knowlton’s article further discover that one of the recommendations suggested by Berman had to do with eliminating the cross-references “xx Infanticide; Offenses against the person” (2005, pg. 130) This change suggests that the emphasis rests on the decision of the woman, and not on the criminality (“Infanticide” and “Offenses”) of the procedure.

Despite obvious biases and a tendency towards Western History and Christian ideology, the LCSH is plagued by a plethora of complaints that have more to do with the utility of the LCSH. In her article, “Critical Views of LCSH, 1990-2001: The Third Bibliographic Essay,” Karen Fischer highlights those problems as “complicated syntax, inadequate syndetic structure, outdated terminology, lack of specificity in the list, and complicated, inconsistent application of subdivisions” (2005, pg. 65). If the LCSH is to remain the international intellectual standard that it presently is, then “outdated terminology” is just one of its obstacles. Another large obstacle has to be access to the LCSH. I scoured the Science, Business, and Industry Library and took a trip to the Humanities and Social Sciences Library just to get a peek at editions from the 70’s and 80’s to no avail. Maybe with more time I would have been able to locate one at a special library like the Mercantile Library, but I am not sure the hunt would be satisfying. If the LCSH wishes to remain current, on the tip of librarians’ tongues, then it has to ensure that its online capabilities increase so that all editions are permanently accessible and open to scrutiny. This will provide librarians with a history of terminology and thought that is traceable, quantifiable, and unabashed in its organic evolution.
References


Writing an abortion essay is not an easy task. These tips will help you to choose an appropriate type of essay and the way how to write it in the best possible way. For instance, in the argumentative essay on why abortion should be illegal, the writer should make emphasis on four to five basic arguments, strengthened by facts and pieces of evidence. Taking a position on pro-life arguments, you can state that fetuses are human beings and are capable of feeling pain, and later support this statement with numerous pieces of evidence. Free Essay: Abortion Abortion is the induced termination of pregnancy before the embryo or fetus is capable of survival. This issue has created moral and... Abortion should, therefore, be legal and accessible in the U.S. because of our human rights, multitude of safety concerns and the. Read More. More about Abortion in Extreme Circumstances Only Essays. Persuasive Essay On Abortion. 1850 Words | 8 Pages. Abortion and Euthanasia Essay. 987 Words | 4 Pages. Abortion Is Morally Justifiable? Abortion is an extremely controversial issue because while some people are completely against it, others believe that a woman should have the right to choose. I believe that abortion is morally and ethically wrong. In my opinion, when a woman chooses to have sex, she is taking a chance. She does this of her own free will, and is in control over what she is doing.