No One Can Whistle a Symphony: Seeking a Catalogers' Code of Ethics†

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Abstract: This paper examines the limited literature about ethics of cataloging in order to elucidate the kind of situations catalogers face with minimal ethical guidance, and the questions those situations raise for the profession. Existing codes of ethics for library staff offer only peripheral guidelines for catalogers, leaving them adrift when ethical issues arise. Ultimately the lack of a clear code of ethics for information organization reinforces existing mystification around the role of catalogers within the library and causes difficulty in justifying decisions to supervisors and administrators. While ALA has a professionally accepted code of ethics, and ALCTS has a supplement to it, these codes are inadequate to clarify and guide cataloging work. Two vastly different approaches to a code of ethics for catalogers are considered for both their strengths and weaknesses. The author will make recommendations about what a code of ethics for catalogers should include, and who should be responsible for creating a new code for the profession.

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1.0 Introduction

Starting in library school students learn that librarianship is a collaborative field. Group projects take pride of place from exams and papers. Working together with others is at the core of librarianship, even for catalogers. Although the bulk of day-to-day cataloging is a solitary pursuit, we rely on cooperative catalog records, consortiums, electronic lists, Facebook groups and professional organizations including the American Library Association (ALA), its division the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services, another ALA division the Association for College and Research Libraries, and others, for feedback, direction, new information and commiseration. Additionally, depending on the size of one's institution there are fellow catalogers and other kinds of librarians just outside the technical services door. These networks of information and collegiality do not disappear when an ethical dilemma is encountered. Professional ethics are, at root, group ethics. Librarians are, at root, collaborators. This community of colleagues is the best fallback for questions of ethics. No one can whistle a symphony, but as a group we create an orchestra of thoughts and experiences that can define our ethical responses to the challenges of our profession.

The consensus among librarians who write about professional ethics of cataloging is that not nearly enough writing is being done on the subject. Technical services can, with little argument, be seen as the heart of what goes on in a library: acquiring resources and making them accessible to users. Brubaker points out that, "the decisions we make in cataloging … can have political and ideological implications" (Brubaker 2002, 20). Yet, in spite of this importance, very little has been published

about the ethics of cataloging. Instead all areas of librarianship have been lumped together under the very broad statements of the ALA Code of Ethics (2002), much of which does not speak to the specific ethical challenges faced by catalogers. Lacking codified ethics specifically for catalogers reinforces the mystification of that role in libraries, and leaves catalogers without guidelines to both inform their work when issues of professional ethics arise, and to justify ethical solutions to supervisors and administrators.

While ALA has a professionally accepted code of ethics, and ALCTS has a supplement to it, these codes are inadequate to clarify and guide cataloging work. Exploring the literature about cataloging and ethical dilemmas provides evidence about the need for a code intended for catalogers, and a look at two vastly different attempts at codes of ethics for catalogers serves as a way to start thinking about what a new code might look like. In summation, the author will make recommendations about what a code of ethics for catalogers should include, and who should take up the torch and hammer out a new code of ethics for the profession.

2.0 The Problem with Codes of Ethics

Codes of ethics are necessarily idealistic—they describe how one "should" act. The difficulty then is that they do not apply to specific situations that catalogers are faced with. "These codes of applied ethics enunciate important general principles, but they do not necessarily help individuals deal with a specific ethical problem … [they] cannot also help resolve ethical cases on which no consensus exists" (Beghtol 2008, 13). Fox and Reece (2012) agree that ethics represent an ideal, but do not necessarily provide clear direction when concrete ethical dilemmas arise. In the case of reclassifying books, CannCasiato finds that ethical standards as put forth by the ALA are adequate for determining the ethical course of action. In other situations, however, the guidelines do not prove adequate to the task. Brubaker (2002), Homan (2012), and Olson (2001) bring up situations where there is no consensus. All three address instances where veracity, authorship, or scholarly integrity is controversial. In these situations catalogers face decisions about how to assign meaningful subject headings to resources that are ambiguous, struggle with the meaning of 'biography' and its implication of non-fiction status, and debate whether making notes in the records of "bad" books (Homan) fulfills an ethical responsibility to users. Significantly, each of these situations arises partially due to the kind of tools catalogers work with. Most often issues are linked to the use of *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (*LCSH*), which is a known flawed tool.

Olson (2001) points out failings of *LCSH* such as privileging gender over race, and using rules that controvert representing creators as they represent themselves (using the example of bell hooks being represented in *LCSH* as Bell Hooks). *LCSH*, despite the best efforts of Sanford Berman and many others, retains significant inadequacies of vocabulary to properly name many groups, genres and attitudes in society. While catalogers work to change the tool, what is the ethical responsibility of the cataloger? How do we apply controlled vocabulary to resources that defy that vocabulary? Brubaker focuses on books that are "ambiguous," meaning, for example, titles that were presented as biography but later are proven to be fictional, and focuses on the lack of finesse in *LCSH* to properly label these items. In the end she suggests this solution: "Since available subdivisions do not provide the cataloger with the tools to make complex distinctions for ambiguous works, our best option appears to be the liberal use of notes" (Brubaker 2008, 27-8). She goes on to clarify that those notes must be unbiased as possible and refer to sources in order not to be prejudicial, that "our charge is use judgment, not to judge" (Brubaker 2008, 28). Her response, given a flawed tool, is to attempt to circumvent it.

The topic of notes for what he calls "bad" books is exactly what Homan (2012) is concerned with. He finds the question of notes to be its own ethical dilemma. He cites works that are similar to the problems Brubaker faces with "ambiguous" books—ones that are not what they purport to be. Homan wonders what the ethical course is when faced with "bad" books—"Should they do anything? Are the dodging their professional responsibilities if they do not? Are they violating their professional ethics if they do?" (Homan 2012, 348). Rather than recourse to a code of ethics, Homan finds his answer partially in the writings of Charles Ammi Cutter. Cutter, in his 1904 *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog*, offers conflicting advice about both steering the user towards the "best books" but also that the "convenience of the public is always to be set before the ease of the cataloger" (Homan 2012, 349). In the first instance it is easy to part ways with Cutter, as steering users to the "best books" in his sense is in direct conflict with items I and II of the ALA Code of Ethics. Homan lays claim to the second statement, however, as an admonishment not to shirk responsibility of librarians for getting users the items they need. Ultimately he quotes Hitchcock (2000) and comes down on the side of adding notes as, "the purpose of library catalog notes for 'bad books' is not to restrict access to the books … but to inform that access" (Homan 2012, 354).

While it might seem simple to string together articles and arrive at what seem to be ethical decisions, it is fair to say that in any of these instances, other decisions might

have been made, using different justifications. Other catalogers would have decided against notes, or a library could opt to withdraw books or collect volumes that enlighten the "ambiguous" titles. Such titles could be the subject of seminars, classes, and exhibits that address scholarship, primary and secondary sources, and other relevant topics. Information on the controversy could be tipped in to the front of relevant books. Or, the choice of reading material and the investigation of its truth or fallacy or ambiguity could be left to the user. As work continues to alter the bias in *LCSH*, policies could be developed for labeling books, followed by user education about those headings. A library could ethically defend each of these decisions.

While codes of ethics clearly state that which can be agreed upon, the grey area around those statements is vast. The point of a new code for catalogers is not to dictate specific solutions to ethical problems, but in the spirit of cataloger's judgment, to be able to look at guidelines written by members of the profession and create the best possible response to an individual situation. While some guidance may be found in existing codes, a code of ethics for catalogers acknowledges that people who catalog confront issues which differ from those faced by other library workers.

3.0 Codes of Ethics

Why a new code altogether? Catalogers and other library staff who determine how patrons can access resources in the library do fundamentally different work than public-facing staff. Catalogers create metadata by describing and classifying resources using controlled vocabularies such as *LCSH*, and standardized guidelines, including *AACR2* and *RDA*. What is clear from the small body of literature about ethics and knowledge organization is that this work is anything but ethically neutral. In our back-offices we have a great deal of power over who finds what, or if anyone finds anything at all, in our libraries. The power to code, describe, and classify information resources is a tremendous responsibility. This power, and the seemingly clandestine nature of our work justifies an explicit code of ethics.

The ALA Code of Ethics addresses cataloging only obliquely. Anna Ferris points out that the Code of Ethics has been criticized for its overly general purview that encompasses almost every kind of library employee (Ferris 2008, 175). A closer look at the ALA Code leaves catalogers who do not work with the public directly only two applicable guidelines: II—resisting censorship, and VII—we separate our personal convictions from our professional duties. Because the guidelines are sparse it is even more important to unpack their meaning.

Item II reads in full "We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources." Although ALA does not define censorship in this context, it can take many forms. By choosing cataloging we take on a deep responsibility to provide equitable and an unbiased access to materials. While removing resources from circulation is generally not our decision, the method in which we label works holds tremendous power and has "direct, practical consequences for users of the library, who … can be aided or impeded by the arrangement of the catalog" (Olson 2001, 639). Catalogers' ability to, in effect, censor works through biased assignment of controlled vocabulary or classification is more egregious than the intentional removal of a text from the collection—whereas that is a decision met by multiple parties and interests within the library, a cataloger can censor a book with a few keystrokes, or lack thereof. "When labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes, it is a censor's tool" (ALA 1996). Item II calls on catalogers to set aside whatever personal biases we might bring to our desk and consider how to make each item as broadly findable as possible.

Item VII clarifies that "We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources." Ideally, catalogers works in an institution that aligns with their personal convictions, thus minimizing the conflict between the two, but even if that should be the case, there will inevitably be situations where the two are at odds. This guideline delineates a hierarchy of ethical behavior. The aims of the institution trump personal convictions while at work. CannCasiato (2011) confronts a case that illustrates how this item works in practice regarding a request from a religious college's trustees to classify of books on intelligent design and creationism with science texts, rather than with religion. Despite personal convictions, he comes down firmly on the side of reclassifying the books, based, in part, on this guideline.

As mentioned, the ALA Code of Ethics is criticized on the basis trying to be all things to all library employees. To look for more guidance, one might turn to the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS) as a group that is more directly concerned with the business of cataloging. Surprisingly, the ALCTS Supplement to the American Library Association Code of Ethics, passed in 1994 and not updated since, offers even less direction for catalogers. Points 2 and 5 only out of nine defined points speak at all to the cataloging profession. Point 2 states that we strive " to provide broad and unbiased access to information." This mimics, in slightly different language, the sentiment of ALA item II and

adds no new considerations to ethical behavior. Point 5, however, touches on something wholly unaddressed by the ALA code; a member "promotes the development and application of standards and professional guidelines." As catalogers we spend our days checking our decisions against professional standards, and this guideline calls upon us to be actively involved in shaping those standards, arguably to in order to be faithful to Point 2. This could apply, for instance, to local library policies for cataloging, critical use of RDA, and NACO or SACO contributions. Olson (2000, 69-70) reminds us "for librarians and libraries in general to abdicate responsibility for subject access to a 'universal' standard is unethical. Every member of the profession of librarianship shares the responsibility."

4.0 New Codes

Such sparse specific guidance has not been adequate for some members of the profession. In 2000, Sanford Berman flew in the face of the ALA Code with his credo or "mission" (Berman 2000):

> Cataloging should identify and make accessible a library's resources – in all formats. That identification and access should be swift and painless. The language and structure of catalog entries should be familiar and comprehensible. And catalogers should recognize that they do what they do not to please bosses and not to mindlessly adhere to rules and protocols, but to serve their information desk colleagues and the public. That's whom they're working for.

It is easy to see the appeal of such a brief and bald statement, and Berman has a point. There is a great deal to be said for cutting through the formalistic language of the ALA Code and taking a no-nonsense approach to what catalogers do. However, there is little concrete ethical framework here, and the credo could be seen to explicitly work against the ALA Code. This statement pushes past ideas of librarianship as a collaborative endeavor, and implies that catalogers work in a vacuum separated from individual library concerns, needs, and constituencies. Berman's credo's very existence, however, begs the worthwhile question: is it more ethical to agree with the statement accepted throughout the profession (ALA) or to question the authority of that statement? It is not within the scope of this article to explore that large question, but it does bear thought.

Sheila Bair, in her 2005 paper *Toward a Code of Ethics for Cataloging*, made a significant and considered effort to author a statement of cataloging ethics. Aside from the fact that without professional consensus and approval this code is an academic exercise, there are weaknesses that bear discussion in the service of a more refined professional code in the future.

While codes of ethics are necessarily idealistic, Bair's code is lofty and uncompromising, using both tone and language that do not reflect the situations in which we work. In general, Bair's statements such as "To ensure," "We are vigilant," and "We are honest and truthful" contrast sharply with language in other codes, such as ALA's "uphold," "protect," "distinguish," and "strive." Bair's code does not seem to admit that we are human beings, and sometimes we are allowed to make errors. With Bair's code there is no try, there is only do.

The grand language also serves to distance us from the realities in which we work. As an example, point II begins: "To ensure that users find the information they need, catalogers gather and organize information …." Her point is that we provide accurate records to that end, and yet I would argue that catalogers cannot "ensure" users will find what they need. Additionally in point VI, "We 'avoid' cultural biases in and work to reform … subject headings …" Many authors—Berman, Olson, Brubaker and others—have thought about, written about and reformed *LCSH* to try to eliminate biases, and it will most likely be a long and continuing process to address the obfuscated and patriarchal system that reviews *LCSH* vocabulary. I would argue that replacing "avoid" with the word "recognize" goes far to acknowledging real-world cataloging and the lack of access and opportunity that many catalogers have to effect change in that system.

Lastly, Bair's code, through both language and content, fails to acknowledge that many catalogers are not degreed librarians, but rather trained staff. Any code of ethics that excludes cataloging staff is ignoring, again, both the reality catalogers work in, and the people who are truly doing this work.

The ALA website has other resources that could be considered to provide some ethical guidelines for librarians in general and catalogers in specific, such at the *Library Bill of Rights* and *Labeling and Rating Systems*. However, analysis of the content of those documents, not being formal codes of ethics, falls outside the scope of this article.

5.0 Conclusion

What should code of ethics for catalogers contain? Both *FRBR* and *RDA* provide some direction about what should be included, such as the principle of representation, which Bair addressed. To take the core of Berman's statement, it is necessary to include why and for whom we catalog to ground cataloging policies and decisions. We can

further investigate Homan's thoughts about "bad books," CannCassiato's reclassification quandary, Svenonius's *Intellectual Foundation of Information Organization* (2000), and Olson's *The Power to Name* (2001) in order to better understand the types of dilemmas for which we need guidance. In addition to a realistic reflection of cataloging work and workers, it should contain the relevant points of the ALA code and the other standards discussed here in an effort to create only one code, rather than a hierarchy of codes—which could precipitate in and of itself an ethical dilemma. The challenge is to figure out what the core of ethics is for cataloging in a constantly changing world of standards and technology, and discover how to codify those values in a way catalogers can agree on.

A professional code of ethics for cataloging fulfills several important roles. A code that is accepted by a profession points to consensus within a group about what constitutes ethical behavior, and thereby places everyone at the same starting point. A specific code, composed and accepted by a professional organization serves to clarify the role of that profession, and lend it credence in the willingness of its members to act according to a standard. Lastly it is a tool that can be used to guide and justify decisions and set policy within cataloging and metadata departments that may have broad implications for the entire library.

I therefore challenge the membership of the Cataloging and Metadata Management Section (CaMMS) of ALCTS to convene a working group to address this void and begin drafting a Code of Ethics for Cataloging that supports catalogers' work as encoders, describers and classifiers. The ethically complex nature of cataloging, the mystification of our hidden work, and the fundamental question of professional consensus mandate a code of ethics that all catalogers can invoke.

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Everything is a Recommendation
Netflix, Altgenres and the Construction of Taste

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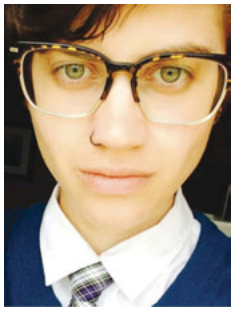

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Abstract: Netflix is a popular subscription streaming service for film and television content. The system uses non-canonical genre classifications called "altgenres" to recommend clusters of works to individual users based on their explicit and implicit preferences. Although altgenre recommendations tend to appear maximally scientific and value-neutral, they are in fact interpretive arguments in service of corporate goals. This paper explores some rhetorical elements and potential ethical ramifications of altgenres *qua* arguments.

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1.0 Introduction

In her essay on believability in collections, Melanie Feinberg (2012, 333) states that, "while scholars of knowledge organization have long contended that information artifacts [like nonnarrative information systems] present arguments, such research has not emphasized how this occurs." This paper is intended to serve partly as a corrective measure in this regard, extending Feinberg's work on classification as a rhetorical space to a critical discussion of Netflix genre classifications. I maintain that these classifications—which Netflix has termed "altgenres" internally—possess a special kind of rhetorical power, forming a critical persuasive component of the personalized collections that Netflix presents to users.

Altgenres function as arguments about and for particular taste preferences and aesthetic experiences. They are particularly compelling because they appear scientific and value-neutral: recommended altgenres emerge from algorithmic processes and are based on a plethora of data related to users' actual viewing behaviors, rating practices, and other interactions with the system. However, coming to see altgenres as interpretive arguments rather than objective products of computation problematizes our initial intuitions about their reliability. Altgenre recommendations are not, then, sound reflections of some stable set of aesthetic preferences; rather, as arguments they discursively mold our taste even as our taste molds them. I contend that this ongoing process has fundamentally ethical consequences. These are largely bound up in altgenres' status as rhetorical devices designed to maximize user engagement and retention. Understood as such, they may contribute to the gradual degradation of users' aesthetic autonomy and the cultivation of habits of passive consumption that restrict aesthetic pleasure.

2.0 What are Altgenres?

For the purposes of this paper, altgenres can be understood as composite, non-canonical genres constructed from Netflix's controlled vocabulary, with membership determined via a vast store of proprietary metadata about

individual works. There is a great degree of diversity apparent in the range of altgenres. Some examples include: gory b-horror movies from the 1980s; gay & lesbian political dramas; detective movies from the 1970s; critically-acclaimed dark French-language movies; and showbiz dramas based on real life.

Journalist Alexis Madrigal (2014) studied the descriptive infrastructure of Netflix in order to build an altgenre generator of his own. In the process of doing so, he discovered that there are 76,897 altgenres and that, further, these "are just the surface manifestation of [a] deeper database." The "deeper database" to which Madrigal refers is the result of meticulous human labor. Netflix employs individuals with some film or entertainment-related expertise to tag every show and movie available through its services using terms ("microtags") from its vocabulary (Fritz 2012). These employees are also trained to rate "movies [and shows] on their sexually suggestive content, goriness, romance levels, and even narrative elements like plot conclusiveness" (Madrigal 2014). Only a subset of the resultant metadata is made explicit to Netflix users in altgenre labels. Much of it is utilized in less overt ways, such as ranking within categories (Amatriain and Basilico 2012).

Madrigal found that altgenres follow a basic formula: (Region + Adjectives + Noun Genre + Based On... + Set In... + From the... + About... + For Age X to Y + Miscellaneous). Of course, individual altgenres only include some of these descriptors. Upon a fairly brief examination, we can see straight-forwardly how this formula maps onto any particular altgenre:

> Gritty Military Action & Adventure from the 1980s
> {Gritty} {Military} {Action & Adventure} {from the 1980s}
> Adjective + Adjective + Noun Genre + From the…

The altgenre formula combines more typical subject headings with "appeal elements." In Joyce Saricks's foundational work on Readers' Advisory, appeal elements are terms used to describe the "feel" of a work or genre (Saricks 2005, 41; Saricks 2009). These elements refer to certain abstract characteristics related to pacing, characterization, story line, or frame (Saricks 2005, 43). For instance, terms such as gritty, dense, laconic, suspenseful, or evocative could all be used as appeal elements under the right conditions.

Altgenres operationalize customized vocabularies of appeal, and are thus effective generators of viewing appeal. Viewing appeal is analogous to the concept of reading appeal; meaning it is, *mutatis mutandis*, "the power to invoke interest in reading and to set off an action of reading" (Dali 2014, 24). Altgenres are just one way in which Netflix uses recommendations to produce appeal, but they have significant import for aesthetic taste. I want to shift now to how altgenres function specifically as arguments for certain preferences and experiences.

3.0 Altgenres as Arguments

Netflix has two basic methods of determining users' preferences: by asking what they prefer or by inferring what they prefer from (patterns in) discrete interactions with the system. The former is a measure of explicit or stated preferences while the latter relies on proxy measures for implicit or revealed ones. Because we cannot look unobstructed into the minds of others, implicit preferences can only ever be inferred from behavior. Netflix has largely shifted towards emphasizing implicit preferences in making its recommendations, and it extrapolates these preferences from "recent plays, ratings, and other interactions" with Netflix (Amatriain and Basilico 2012). Inference is thus a significant iterative step in Netflix's recommendation process.

Because Netflix identifies appropriate altgenres largely on the basis of the user's revealed—rather than stated—preferences, there is a sense in which the service seems to tell the user things about their personal taste that might not otherwise be accessible to them. This is one way in which Netflix might be said to aid users' understanding of their own taste: on the basis of the user's actual viewing patterns, the service illustrates for them certain features to which they typically respond positively. This leads Madrigal to call altgenres "a tool for introspection," and once led a friend of mine to say that they were sometimes "too much truth for one night."

However, questioning whether Netflix simply guides or invasively co-determines users' taste complicates this seemingly positive introspective effect. It is critical to understand that altgenres are recommendations and that recommendations are themselves arguments. We can formulate these recommendation-arguments as follows (Wright 2012, 352):

A. One makes a "diagnosis" that offers an explanation of some data (e.g., the user views a lot of action movies because they like films with violent action sequences);
B. One forms a "prediction" based on that "diagnosis" (e.g., the user will enjoy movies with violent action sequences);
C. One appeals to that "prediction" in conjunction with some "normative claim(s)" to generate a "recommendation" about what one ought to do (e.g., the user will enjoy movies with violent action sequences / watching movies with features

> you like is good / the user should watch these movies with violent action sequences).

These arguments shape our experiences of works by picking out certain features and presenting them as justifications for a recommendation. As recommended categories, altgenres thus set our expectations of the works that they include by making certain features salient prior to viewing and obscuring others. They may also drastically alter how we apprehend the work-in-question at a somewhat more foundational level. In his landmark paper, "Categories of Art," Kendall Walton (1970, 343) posits, among other things, that we perceive works of art in categories and, further, that how we categorize various works actually alters what features we take those works to have. In a sense, the category itself sets our evaluative standard for its member works, and this has profound implications for the effects art has on us and for our own aesthetic judgments.

So while altgenres shape our expectations and experiences of what we watch, they also provide scaffolding for our ensuing evaluative efforts. This occurs in the category-dependent manner that Walton details (where the category in which we perceive the work helps determine what aesthetic properties we attribute to it and thus affects our appraisal), but also in another way peculiar to recommendation. Altgenres are categories that purport not only to tell us something about their member works, but also something about ourselves. That is, they describe works of art just as they describe the user's taste. In binding categories to our own individual preferences, altgenres acquire a special kind of explanatory power: once a user has watched a work in a recommended category, the altgenre begins to function as a suggested explanation for users' enjoyment or lack thereof. Altgenres can tell their story about any pleasure or displeasure they experience while viewing a particular work. Netflix essentially mediates the common struggle to articulate why you like what you like by providing a brief account of what features you enjoy.

Confirmation bias may well play an essential role here in shoring up the user's sense that Netflix has successfully identified their actual preferences rather than made an argument inferring certain preferences. For example, if I watch and enjoy *Dog Day Afternoon* as a token of the altgenre "Visually-striking Crime Movies from the 1970s," I am apt to assume that Netflix got it right: visually-striking '70s crime movies are in fact the kind of thing I enjoy for the reasons Netflix presented to me at the outset. Yet, regardless of how much I enjoyed the film, Netflix's recommendation-argument still might not be sound because its diagnostic premise (i.e., that I watch certain movies because they share these specific features) could still be inaccurate. Which is to say, I might have actually enjoyed any number of different things about *Dog Day Afternoon*. Perhaps the rawness of the dialogue or the hopelessness of the protagonist's downward spiral appealed to me most. It is therefore conceivable that a recommendation can actually obscure my own latent aesthetic justification.

There is also the more pernicious possibility that these recommendations are themselves self-actuating—that is, they may have the capacity to bring about in the user just those preferences that they argue the user already has. Here, however, it would be a step too far to think solely in terms of how Netflix's recommendation algorithm shapes users when users do in fact shape the algorithm. When I say that users "shape the algorithm," I do not mean simply that they generate data that straightforwardly affects the algorithm's output. I want, instead, to refer to the possibility that, depending on the contours of the data users generate, the algorithm might deploy different methods of calculation. This could occur, for instance, when some trend in a user's viewing practices triggers a new subroutine in the algorithm. At the very least, Netflix periodically adjusts the algorithm in response to patterns in user data; users can thus shape the algorithm non-mechanically by motivating intervention on the part of Netflix developers.

Any critical exploration of Netflix and its infrastructure must take the user/system transaction into account. In his critique of Facebook and its big data research, sociologist Nathan Jurgenson (2015) explains that:

> Algorithms are made to capture, analyze, and readjust individual behavior in ways that serve particular ends. Individual choice is partly a result of how the algorithm teaches us, and the algorithm itself is dynamic code that reacts to and changes with individual choice. Neither the algorithm or individual choice can be understood without the other.

The Netflix user is then not an autonomous agent utilizing a fee-based service to meet pre-specified preferences: rather, the user enters into a mutual, dynamic transaction with the system, wherein their preferences structure and are structured by pervasive recommendation. Put simply, my personal taste affects what I see on my Netflix homepage, but the reverse is also true. Ultimately, I am a different aesthetic agent when and because I use Netflix.

4.0 Ethical Consequences

There is a concerted effort on the part of Netflix developers to move towards a passive discovery model, wherein users no longer need to search for something to watch because the system provides them with suitably customized selections (Amatriain 2014). As the Netflix system deemphasizes the practice of searching independently, it ac-

tively works to funnel users towards recommended titles. Altgenres are an especially effective way to do this, partly because their obviously customized nature highlights only one part of the user's transaction with the system: altgenres illustrate to users that their own explicit and implicit preferences determine what they see. That those preferences are themselves molded by what they see, and that they only see a curated reflection of a small subset of their inferred preferences, remains largely invisible to them. This model also carries the risk that users will become habituated to (and thus complacent with respect of) unreflectively "consuming" content. Such passive consumption does not require us to spend as much time honing the appreciative and interpretive skills that afford us greater aesthetic pleasure in the long term.

The success of such an operation depends in no small part on the trust users place in it. Melanie Feinberg (2012), in her examination of the believability of collections, formulates the concept of synthetic ethos. Synthetic ethos refers to how "the various textual elements that form the collection…work synthetically to produce a compelling rhetorical object" (Feinberg 2012, 336). In Aristotelian rhetoric, ethos is one of three forms of persuasive appeal, the other two being pathos (persuasion by evoking emotional responses) and logos (persuasion by rational argumentation); ethos persuades by virtue of the speaker's character, their perceived credibility and reliability (Poggi 2005). Speakers can cultivate ethos through demonstrations of practical wisdom, moral integrity, and goodwill (Feinberg 2012, 331-2). The concept of synthetic ethos allows us to talk about how information systems, rather than individual speakers, persuade their audiences to take particular courses of action.

One way that Netflix cultivates synthetic ethos is through its altgenres, which constitute recommendations for what it is we "really want to watch." In their critique of Big Data research, danah boyd and Kate Crawford (2012, 663) refer to a "widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy." Altgenres reap the benefits of just this belief; other demonstrations of practical wisdom are barely needed when many users accept Netflix's show of scientific accuracy at face value. Moreover, altgenres themselves are persuasive partly because they obscure the human labor involved in their production. They are presented, more or less, as the incontrovertible product of computation and a data set that is thought to be representative of the user's preferences. Disagreeing with an altgenre is then something akin to denial.

One can also detect the "aura of truth" in the origins of Netflix's present-day classification procedures. When he first developed the tagging procedures that would produce altgenres, Netflix's Vice President of Product Innovation, Todd Yellin, described this process as one that would effectively identify the "'quanta,' the little 'packets of energy' that compose each movie" (Madrigal 2014). Jens-Erik Mai (2010, 631-2) describes classification approaches of this sort as building on "a broader folk theory of categorization," wherein:

> The core defining concept of classification limits the power of the classifier to simply identifying the characteristics of things, and grouping those things that share characteristics. Classification thereby becomes a technical process that is merely occupied with the discovery of what things are and placing them in the one system given by nature.

Referring to a vocabulary of appeal as if it corresponds to "little packets of energy" in a work of art makes tagging (a fundamentally interpretive practice) sound highly technical—or magical, depending on whom you ask—and, if performed well, indisputable. Although I take it Joseph Tennis (2013, 48) is correct in conceptualizing knowledge organization work as craft and arguing for an "artistic turn in descriptive practices," this is in conflict with the altgenre project as it has thus far been conceived; as it stands, altgenres' rhetorical potency emerges from a common folk conception of classification. But there is no straightforward calculation, no perfect accumulation of descriptors, that can guarantee a particular sort of aesthetic experience or verdict, and there is certainly no metaphysical "energy" that constitutes the work of art. Netflix's customized recommendations are persuasive partly because they utilize and foster a logic of aesthetic pleasure that is wholly at odds with any prevailing philosophical conception.

Relatedly, it is important to see that, however neutral or scientific it might seem, there are particular biases and human values embedded in the language of altgenres. Indeed, it is not possible to eradicate bias from classificatory procedures or their resultant systems (Feinberg 2007). A great deal more could be written on this following a careful reading of Netflix's vocabulary itself, but I will save the bulk of such an analysis for another paper. Suffice it to say that the Netflix controlled vocabulary is certainly limited and limiting. Much valuable work has already been done by scholars of knowledge organization to interrogate the ways in which classification schemes endorse and reinforce hegemonic value systems (Olson 2001; Furner 2007; Drabinski 2013; Koford 2014). This inevitably leads to the silencing of marginalized views, experiences, and (aesthetic and non-aesthetic) judgments. For instance, Netflix taggers categorize *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* in the following genres: Horror

Movies, Teen Screams, Supernatural Horror Movies, Cult Horror Movies, Slasher and Serial Killer Movies, and Cult Movies. Yet the film's status as a queer horror classic—primarily among queer horror enthusiasts—is nowhere detectable in its Netflix description. This is unsurprising, given that "queer" is not an available Netflix descriptor. The closest the vocabulary comes is the obviously exclusionary "Gay & Lesbian," which renders invisible (or perhaps simply irrelevant to appeal) other queer identities. However, even "Gay & Lesbian Horror" does not appear to be an in-use altgenre, if it exists at all. This is not a function of what Netflix has in its collection, but rather of which sorts of categories it considers to be sufficient or sufficiently broad generators of viewing appeal.

Finally, it is unclear that Netflix would categorize the film as queer horror even if such an altgenre existed. Although it is not a subtle film, reading *Nightmare on Elm Street 2* as queer horror is still contingent on certain kinds of relational knowledge (to, e.g., interpret it as an allegorical horror film), contextual knowledge (to, e.g., know how it has been discussed by queer fans), and political commitments (to, e.g., understand the genre designation and take it seriously). Adherents to Yellin's folk theory of categorization would likely fail to classify the film in this way. Depending on how a particular tagger is situated, they may not be able to discover the film's membership in this genre merely by looking.

Because it is the very nature of classification to obscure certain viewpoints (Bowker and Starr, 2000), I suspect there are numerous other such examples. There are currently no formal mechanisms in place to allow users to contest Netflix classifications, a fact that surely emerges (at least partly) from its pretense to neutrality and limits progressive improvements to the vocabulary over time.

Even a reader who is sympathetic to the aforementioned concerns might at this point wonder: why should any of these worries be peculiar to or especially pronounced for Netflix? After all, we receive recommendations frequently and from a wide range of sources. Some of these recommendations are, like those Netflix produces, aesthetic in character, in that they speak to the aesthetic content of some work of art and/or employ an aesthetic judgment as part of the central predictive argument. This is true when, for instance, a Readers' Advisory librarian recommends a novel to a patron looking for something new to read. The librarian predicts that reading the novel will bring about desirable states in the patron by virtue of certain features of the work itself. Both the librarian and Netflix rely upon (necessarily biased) vocabularies of appeal, and in either case the content of the recommendation will likely frame the recommendee's experience of the work. That is, in both instances a third party has discerned (however successfully or unsuccessfully) some purportedly relevant features of the object of recommendation that in turn affect the recommendee's reception of that object.

Given this, should we really think that the Netflix recommendation is different in kind from the librarian's? Netflix recommendations often differ greatly from the recommendations individuals make to one another, which are not necessarily consistent with any set of norms or standards and can thus vary widely in terms of structure and purpose; they may be, for instance, under-supported, malformed, or insufficiently personalized. But when customized aesthetic recommendations emerge as manifestations of some institutional descriptive infrastructure, they seem to have a great deal more in common than not.

Nonetheless, I maintain that there are some significant differences. One essential point of divergence between Netflix recommendations and those issued by librarians is that the former serve very particular pragmatic, corporate purposes. As Felix Salmon notes in his 2014 Reuters editorial on Netflix's recommendation algorithm, "Netflix's big problem…is that it can't afford the content that its subscribers most want to watch…as a result, Netflix can't, any longer, aspire to be the service which allows you to watch the movies you want to watch." Salmon contrasts Netflix streaming with its DVD-by-mail service: whereas the latter allows users to procure most any title they like, the former is severely constrained by legal and economic considerations. Put simply, Netflix can only make accessible works for which it has procured streaming rights, and this excludes a great many things from its overall collection. This, in turn, restricts what users see in their customized collections.

These constraints are not, in and of themselves, problematic. Salmon (2014) claims that a restricted catalog incentivizes directing users towards works that are largely aesthetically poor or middling; this probably requires further investigation, as it is not yet clear that the legality of streaming a movie or television series reliably bears on aesthetic quality. However, problems emerge if we consider the effects of these constraints on user autonomy. When the ultimate goal is profit, legal restrictions do incentivize cultivating an environment of pervasive recommendation that facilitates passive discovery and directs users away from independent searches of the catalog. So when Amatriain and Basilico (2012) trumpet that, on the Netflix user interface, "everything is a recommendation," they elide the fact that this is ultimately to aid user retention in a world where external forces limit what Netflix can make accessible. Although external forces also affect what libraries can make accessible, there is no systematic effort to obscure this, nor are readers' advisors' recommendations formulated to aid "user retention." Netflix recommendations,

however, facilitate viewing practices centered on convenience rather than some overriding aesthetic preference while simultaneously concealing the fact that these practices are in service of corporate goals.

Finally, Netflix cares about the user's enjoyment only instrumentally. The recommendation-argument, presented in an earlier section, begins with a diagnosis that takes the following form: "the user views a lot of X because they like Xs that include Y feature(s)." While the argumentative structure is likely to remain basically stable over time, the 'enjoyment' piece is open to revision. For the time being, guiding users towards content they will enjoy seems to be the best practice for increasing engagement and, consequently, retention. However, it is conceivable that we might come to know or it might come to be the case that something else is better at fostering engagement. That new thing could potentially be aesthetically arbitrary. For instance, if movies that featured a preponderance of the color red in their promotional materials reliably correlated with increased viewing by all or a subset of users, there would be nothing to stop Netflix from factoring this into its recommendations. One can even imagine a (slightly dystopian) scenario wherein Netflix determines that it can increase engagement most effectively by eliciting addictive viewing behaviors in users. Salmon (2014) even suggests that something like this may already be going on, as Netflix recommendations increasingly emphasize television over film content because, the argument goes, viewers are apt to binge watch whole series.

In contrast, the librarian is—or should be—unwilling to alter their recommendations in ways that are purely engagement-maximizing and seemingly irrelevant to actual enjoyment. Although librarians certainly care about engagement (and might even value enjoyment instrumentally in the sense that it cultivates in patrons a genuine motive to read more), they are bound to a robust system of core values. The librarian's overarching commitments to intellectual freedom and non-coercive service would tend to preclude recommendations based on arbitrary features or addictive properties. The same cannot be said for Netflix or, in fairness, most any enterprise for which the ultimate motive is profit.

5.0 Conclusion

Too little critical attention has yet been paid to the rhetorical dimensions of recommender systems, to the ways in which their recommendation-arguments frame our experiences and depend upon classifications that necessarily "[valorize] some point of view and [silence] another" (Bowker and Starr, 2000, 5). I have argued that Netflix altgenres make arguments to users regarding their preferences, what they ought to watch in light of those preferences, and why they experience what they watch as they do. In so doing, I have outlined a series of concerns related to how these arguments shape taste preferences while appearing incontrovertible.

In the end, there is no denying that Netflix streaming is enormously popular. The service has more than 60 million subscribers in about 50 countries; approximately 40 million of those subscribers are in the United States (Spangler 2015). Furthermore, in 2013 it was estimated that, together, Netflix and YouTube constitute roughly half of all peak Internet traffic in North America (Bump 2013). And yet there have been no sustained interrogations of what Netflix's recommendation practices might mean for users' taste or for their experiences of the content they stream.

Recently, Netflix has begun to transition away from hyper-granular altgenres towards categories with fewer descriptors (e.g., Witty Movies, Cult Movies, Romantic Action & Adventure). Such a shift indicates that Netflix may have altered some part or parts of its recommendation algorithm. Perhaps highlighting personalization is no longer perceived as the most effective way to promote engagement, or perhaps new ways of emphasizing customization have proven more potent—for instance, including a "Because you watched X" statement with each recommended title. Maybe the change occurred because user engagement is improved by recommending broader altgenres with more member titles. Since one should not expect Netflix to be consistently forthcoming about the reasoning behind each of its decisions and since these decisions have actual consequences for the service's many users, we are in need of attentive, rigorous analyses of Netflix, of its descriptive infrastructure and the rhetorical strategies it employs to achieve its objectives. Here I have offered a brief account of how altgenres function as arguments with ethical implications, but it seems there is much more interpretive work to be done if we want to formulate answers to a critical emerging question: How does Netflix shape us?

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