

Queerlit Database. Making Swedish LGBTQI Literature Easily Accessible

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Abstract

This work focuses on questions of knowledge organization related to literary fiction. How can LGBTQI fictional literature become more accessible to readers and scholars? The project Queerlit Metadata Development and Searchability for LGBTQI Literary Heritage addresses this question in two ways: by the development of a thesaurus for the description of Swedish LGBTQI literature, and by building a curated bibliographical database for this material with flexible search options. Despite the community and scholarly interest in LGBTQI literature, relevant LGBTQI literature is hard to find both for readers and researchers. Subject indexing is underdeveloped for this topic, and subject headings have been historically inadequate and offensive. The paper focuses on how LGBTQI literature can be made more easily accessible through subject indexing. This will make new research possible, such as gaining overviews of the development of specific themes over time, the presence of LGBTQI literature within or outside of the literary canon or in different genres and changing ideas and perceptions concerning sexualities and gender identities. It will also accommodate user's needs of better access to LGBTQI themed fictional literature.

Keywords

Fiction, bibliographic database, metadata, gender, sexuality, subject indexing, linked open data

1. Introduction

Work on LGBTQI within the digital humanities is still scarce, and related digital projects mainly concern digitization of material in existing collections or creating collections of new digital material. Possibly this is a consequence of the emphasis on data mining and empirical studies within the digital humanities, which may be at odds with the human effort required to recognize and understand LGBTQI texts. Digital initiatives to recover LGBTQI history often focus on making community archives accessible [1], since LGBTQI history has left behind a lack of information resources in general. Due to this, fictional narratives, both those that explicitly thematize homosexuality or trans identities and those that are less explicit but invite queer readings, have played, and still play an important part as a source for the understanding of queer lives [2].

Subject specific indexing of literature has a long history within early gay and lesbian movements. As McKinney has shown, activist librarians worked to create subject access to lesbian materials through paper cards and software already in the 1980s: “the index is a resolutely political and willfully constructed interface between users and information.” [3]. This quotation locates knowledge organization as a central tool for marginalized groups in libraries and archives, but knowledge organization is also a crucial part of many digital humanities projects [4]. Ruberg, Boyd, and Howe [5] have identified precisely subject indexing as a productive place to make queer interventions in the

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digital humanities. The challenge is to methodically rethink the highly standardized indexing systems to give room for critical queer perspectives and to better answer the needs of users.

This paper presents an overview of the project. Queerlit has four aims:

1. To develop a subject specific thesaurus for indexing LGBTQI literature in collaboration with KvinnSam (National Resource Library for Gender Research, University of Gothenburg). The project builds on the currently largest international thesaurus for LGBTQI materials, Homosaurus [6], structured as a linked data vocabulary. Subject to available resources, the Queerlit thesaurus will also be mapped to other subject indexing systems.
2. To identify LGBTQI fiction in collaboration with experts on Swedish LGBTQI literature and to develop inclusion criteria for LGBTQI fiction.
3. To construct a sub-database in LIBRIS (Swedish Union Catalogue) that contains bibliographic records of fictional LGBTQI literature in collaboration with the Swedish National Library and KvinnSam while using the external thesaurus to describe the material.
4. To make the sub-database available through a separate end-user search interface allowing for more specialized searches than LIBRIS does and, subject to available resources, linking the records to relevant open data from external sources.

By using LIBRIS as an existing infrastructure, we can embed the Queerlit terms in an operative system that is widely used. To date, the work adapting and translating the Homosaurus to Swedish is finished and indexing the LIBRIS sub-database starts in spring 2022 and ends after a year. Adaptation is needed since the Homosaurus is constructed to be applicable to information resources in different media formats rather than just books on which Queerlit focus. This means certain terms need to be adapted and others added to better correspond to fiction, and terms needs to be adjusted to a Swedish context and language use. The need for more adequate terms is explained by two of the developers of the Homosaurus: “When subject terms are missing, inaccurate, or inadequate, people are elided, misrepresented, or underrepresented. Moreover, it is a fundamental failure of information institutions’ missions to connect users and information.” [7]. Currently, the Queerlit thesaurus contains 968 terms that will be applied to the approximately 1500 titles in the database. All terms have an explicit or implicit relevance for LGBTQI literature. For more general indexing, for example time, place, person or genre, SAO is used.

2. Subject indexing systems

In 2011 the Swedish National Library got an extended assignment to coordinate the Swedish libraries [8]. This led to a transfer of the responsibility for the administration of Swedish subject headings for fiction, from a committee led by the Swedish Library Association to the Swedish National Library [9]. In accordance with this, the Swedish National Library decided to shift from specific list of subject headings for fiction to SAO (Svenska ämnesord – Swedish Subject Headings), which is a general subject headings system, at the same time integrating some of the terms from the fiction specific system [10]. After this, the number of subject headings per bibliographic record for fiction increased from an average of 1.5 terms in 2008, to 1.9 terms in 2012 and to 3.7 terms in 2020 [11]. The SAO has a range of approximately 30,000 terms and is used by most libraries in Sweden who catalog their records in the union catalog. The representation of terms for LGBTQI people is wide but not deep, e.g., ‘Transgendered people’ exists as a subject heading but other important terms such as ‘trans men’, ‘trans women’ or ‘transitioning’ do not.

Figures 1 and 2 below demonstrate subject metadata for the same book, as it is now indexed in Libris using SAO and related terms in Library of Congress Subject Headings (Figure 1), and the same title in the Queerlit database indexed with the Queerlit thesaurus that allows much more detailed presentation of relevant topics compared to SAO (Figure 2).

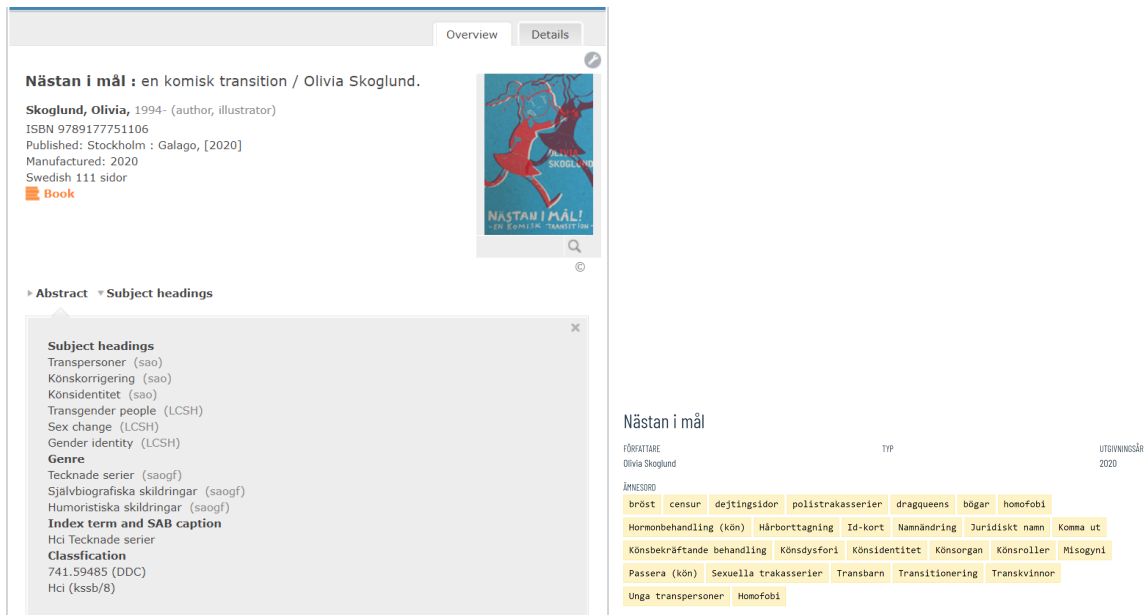


Figure 1: On the left, an example of index terms for Olivia Skoglund’s *Nästan i mål. En komisk transition* [Nearing the Finish Line. A Comical Transition] (2020) with SAO in LIBRIS, and corresponding terms in Library of Congress Subject headings_z <https://libris.kb.se/bib/9111nlkh7jnwp14m?tab2=subj>. On the right, the same title in the Queerlit database with index terms from the Queerlit thesaurus.

Figure 2 demonstrates both more in-depth indexing, and more specific terms related to this work. The terms in translation are “Breast”, “Censorship”, “Dating websites”, “Police harassment”, “Drag queens”, “Gay men”, “Homophobia”, “Hormone therapy”, “Hair removal”, “Social security cards”, “Legal name change”, “Legal name”, “Coming out”, “Gender affirming surgery”, “Gender dysphoria”, “Gender identity”, “Genitals”, “Gender roles”, “Misogyny”, “Passing (Gender)”, “Sexual Harassment”, “Trans children”, “Transitioning (gender)”, “Trans women”, “Transgender youth”, “Homophobia”. Most of these also have equivalent English terms in Homosaurus. The obvious difference between SAO and the Queerlit terms is that many more terms that are at the same time more specific are included in the latter.

3. Queerlit database: the question of inclusion

There are some methodological dilemmas when building a bibliographical database for queer fictional literature. Firstly, indexing fiction is a more complex practice than indexing non-fiction. A fictional work is not in the same way about a specific topic, that may be summarized in an abstract or captured by keywords. It has an aesthetic aspect that requires the reader to participate in meaning-making [12, 13]. A methodologically challenging question is how to establish criteria for inclusion: how to draw the line between stable and variable content meanings, or, to phrase it differently, separate “denotative”, or factual, elements from “connotative”, that is, elements interpreted from the text [12]? This question is especially pertinent to queer fiction. “Queer fiction” may refer to literature manifestly representing norm-breaking genders and sexualities, literature that is “about” LGBTQI identities [13]. However, “queer fiction” may also refer to texts that are open to queer readings, without a manifest representation of LGBTQI identities or actions. In fact, queer reading practices seeking to uncover what is hidden in a text [2], may be seen as an absolute opposite to the search for stable descriptions or concepts that an indexer may look for.

From the point of view of the indexer, it is difficult to accommodate queer readings, since they are so dependent on the reading, both subjective and unstable. However, a too firm exclusion of “meaning” on behalf of manifest representation may exclude titles that are expected to be found in the Queerlit database; e.g. texts that have been integrated into a queer canon, and texts that for contextual reasons

have been interpreted as queer. To accommodate this, we have included a contextual criterion for inclusion, stating that works should be included if they previously have been described as belonging within a tradition of queer fiction, by research or community groups, and if they also use codes or symbols that are important within a queer literary tradition. To summarize, the database includes fictional literature (written in Swedish or any national minority language) that explicitly addresses or represents same-sex sexual practices, feelings and/or identities, as well as the crossing of binary gender norms in body, appearance and/or identity. The database includes both works that explicitly represent these matters and works that through context can be understood as such, for example through documented readings in research and community groups. This means that the database will also include titles where the LGBTQI themes or motifs are not central to the plot, as well as works reflecting negative representation related to these themes (homophobia, violence etc.).

4. Identifying the user needs

In addition to specifying inclusion criteria, user needs for subject terms were surveyed. In the period from November 2021 to March 2022, two online questionnaires were distributed to 1) potential users and 2) librarians as service providers. Using project group's channels like mailing lists and social media, 108 replies were received on the former survey; the latter is still open for participation. Detailed analysis will be accompanied by focus group interviews as part of planned future research. Here we briefly report on the survey of potential end users.

The survey of potential end users showed that they read LGBTQI fiction a few times per year (49.1%), a few times per month (25.9%) or every week (14.8%). Most read for pleasure (85.1%), to discover experiences or characters they can identify with (81.2%), to find themes they can relate to (73.3%), or because they are interested in LGBTQI questions (70.3%). The majority finds information about what to read via social media (76.2%) as well as via their friends and acquaintances (72.3%); while most turn to library to acquire a copy of the book (71.3%) or to a bookstore (68.3%). Their satisfaction when searching online is for the majority neither good nor bad (65.3%), though some consider it good (18.8%) and some bad (11.9%). Open replies demonstrate that online searching is suboptimal. Limitations in searching make it hard to find LGBTQI fiction because search terms are either compared against titles that do not clearly denote what the work is about or against subject index terms that are too broad (see Figures 1 and 2 above for an example). When presented with options for improved searching, most respondents (88 or 87.1%) prioritized using related terms for broader search to get more results (higher recall). Many (71 or 70.3%) also wished for search functionalities that would support them in retrieving fewer and more specific results based on narrower terms when too many results are retrieved (higher precision). More than half (60 or 59.4%) would also appreciate more user-friendly interfaces with the option to browse by hierarchically arranged subjects (as you would browse library shelves in a physical library), a feature that is lacking in many online search services today. Similarly, about half of the respondents (48 or 47.5%) would also appreciate the option for word sense disambiguation that would allow getting only those results related to the specific meaning of the search term they are looking for. These results point to the need to implement such features in the Queerlit search interface which is currently under development.

5. Conclusion

Looking for information on fiction where the language is often on purpose metaphorical effectively prevents information discovery. Therefore, automatic methods that rely on full-text matching of search terms simply do not work for fiction. The problem is even more exacerbated with LGBTQI fiction where themes are often even more hidden. Intellectual subject indexing relying on established systems such as subject headings does not work either because these systems tend to be too general, resulting in indexing of only very broad themes which in turn retrieves either too many irrelevant results or too few relevant ones. It is therefore not surprising to see that end users do not reach out to the library catalog for recommendations on what to read: the catalog does not support finding relevant information.

The results of the Queerlit project are so far the establishment of inclusion criteria that allow us to capture both works where LGBTQI themes, motifs and characters are not central to the plot, and those

works that have been important for queer reading practices within research and the LGBTQI community. Furthermore, the Queerlit thesaurus includes more new interconnected terms relevant for the LGBTQI community [7]. The indexing policy developed by the project also supports higher recall and higher precision, both of which are needed according to the survey, since each title is indexed with more terms, and these terms are more precise. Through a future survey of librarians as service providers as well as focus group interviews, the project aims to further identify specific needs related to subject searching of LGBTQI fiction and to use this input in the construction of the interface, which is still under development. Ultimately, with its solutions it hopes to leverage access to information to users of LGBTQI fiction.

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