



Intellectual
Freedom
Committee

Oregon Library Association

Rating and Labeling Systems and Our Library Catalogs

January 2026

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC.

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Rating and Labeling Concerns in Libraries

In today's Tuesday Topic, the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) would like to shed light on the concern and impact of rating systems and warning labels on materials, and the prevalence of those systems in our library cataloging records.

As outlined by an [ALA interpretation](#) of the [Library Bill of Rights](#), rating and labeling systems, when applied as a way to warn customers of the material content, conflict with some core tenets of the library profession, including anti-censorship. These systems can raise concerns over a chilling effect with our customers, and when systems stray from a viewpoint-neutral organizational system, create bias within our catalogs.

As stated by the ALA interpretation regarding labeling and rating systems:

Labeling Systems:

“Prejudicial labels are used to try to influence opinions or behaviors and restrict access, which is a form of censorship. The ALA opposes using labels to bias people’s views about library resources.

These types of labels might be based on a value judgment about:

- the content;
- language;
- themes; or
- the background or views of the creator.

These labels often mark materials as inappropriate or offensive for certain groups of users. They are used to warn, discourage, or block access...Libraries that use prejudicial labeling assume they know what is appropriate for users. They also assume people need guidance in deciding what ideas to explore. The ALA opposes prejudicial labeling. Everyone has the right to form their own opinions about what they choose to read, listen to, or watch.”

Rating Systems:

“Rating systems are tools or labels designed to guide people on whether materials are suitable or appropriate. The creators of these systems assume there is someone who can decide what is right for others. They also assume that people want or need help choosing what to access....

...Using, enforcing, or approving of rating systems violates the Library Bill of Rights. It may also be unconstitutional if it restricts someone’s access to library materials or resources. If a law requires libraries to enforce rating systems, the library leadership should seek legal advice to understand how it will affect library operations.”

Unfortunately, rating systems are often automatically applied to our standard cataloging records and are becoming more and more invasive and difficult to remove. Regarding the ratings being added to our bibliographic records, ALA states:

“Some libraries add ratings in their bibliographic records because **they accept standard records that include them** [emphasis added]. Others do so to provide as much information about the resource as possible. Including rating systems in library catalogs can conflict with intellectual freedom principles. Cataloging best practices do not require libraries to include ratings. If ratings are included, the source of the rating should be clear to users. Including ratings without proper attribution is a violation of the Library Bill of Rights. The library should not endorse rating systems and rating systems should never be used to restrict access to materials based on the age of a user. Such restrictions may violate the First Amendment rights of minors.”

When talking about cataloging, it can be difficult to discuss MARC records without going into “cataloging speak.” However, this topic should be understood by and be approachable to catalogers and non-catalogers alike. A helpful way to think about our catalogs and cataloging records is that they are an extension of our library, and the language and aids used within this system reflect on the overall organization. Because of this, we should be keenly aware of the language and aids we are endorsing within our records.

The remainder of this article will take you through the prevalence of these rating systems being automatically applied to our standard library records and will provide some ideas on how to remove them from your library catalogs.

Prevalence

Warnings, labels, and rating systems are appearing more frequently and being applied across a variety of fields and formats. It is hard to ignore that these tools may serve as mechanisms for censorship or to discourage the use of certain materials. As a result, it is increasingly important for cataloging professionals to recognize these labels and applications and actively work to prevent such censoring tools from being embedded in our catalogs.

Within our records, there are common areas to spot the automatic application of rating and labeling systems. Specifically, there are notes fields, found in the 500 range, where a cataloger can add notes about the specific title they are cataloging.

One of the fields actually dedicated to these types of ratings is the [521: Target Audience Note](#). As stated by the Library of Congress, the intention of this field is for “information that identifies the specific audience or intellectual level for which the content of the described item is considered appropriate.” As intellectual freedom advocates, the IFC would urge folks to use this field with caution. Decisions about whether materials fit within the scope of a library’s collection are made at the selection stage. Beyond that, it’s not the library’s role to determine whether materials are appropriate for any specific customer or user.

Common applications within this field include:

- MPAA ratings – For more information on the concerns of MPAA, please see: [Rated R for Ridiculous](#).
- Grade ratings
- Age ratings
- Content warnings

Here are some examples of the types of ratings that are being automatically applied to our catalog records using the 521 field:

- Ages 4-7.
- For mature audiences ages 16+.
- Suggested for mature readers.
- Recommended for ages 8+.
- Rated R.
- TV-14: disturbing content, violence.
- Rating: PG for epic battle action and violence.
- Ages 12 and up.
- Grade level: 5-8.

Another common field where bias content and restrictive notes are automatically added to our records is within the [520 note field](#). This is an unformatted note field to add any “summary, abstract, review or printed phrase describing the material.” Unfortunately, this is also where published content warnings are often applied. Here are some examples of content warnings that are often added to standard records:

- Content warnings: Scenarios involving emotional abuse, obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety, suicidal ideation, violence, murder, and mentions of a race massacre--|cAuthor's website.
- Content warning: this book mentions homophobia, transphobia, toxic relationships, and sex--Copyright page.
- The content warnings: for an animal death, profanity, and a surprise wedding--Preliminary page.
- The content warnings for a cheating ex, profanity, and a surprise pregnancy--Preliminary page.
- Content Warning: this graphic novel includes depictions of death.--Title page verso.

Finally, the [500 field](#) for general notes, which is the most forgiving of note fields, is where “general information for which a specialized 5XX note field has not been defined.” Essentially, this is a field where a cataloger can put in anything deemed of importance not otherwise noted about the title. These fields often contain the summary of the book, but can deceptively add warning labels to the end or within the summary. Here are some examples of warnings that are often automatically added to standard records:

- While this story is generally light, I would be remiss if I did not include the following content warnings: detailed account of childhood abandonment, homelessness, a parent with early-onset Alzheimer's disease.--|cProvided by publisher.
- Author's Note: This book is my love letter to both the autumn months and the late nineties. There are cozy harvest festivals, crunchy leaves, Halloween celebrations, and Thanksgiving pies! Be prepared for a couple of nineties rom-com clichés as well. I couldn't help myself. While this book is full of fun nostalgia and autumn spirit, I would also like to note the following content warnings: -Descriptive sex scenes -Explicit language -Death of a parent from heart attack (off-page) -Grieving of a loved one -Parental abandonment and estrangement -Divorce -Cheating (off-page; not main characters) Be kind to your heart and you read, friends. Now grab a blanket, light up a cozy candle, and revisit the autumn of 1997! xo Julie. O.
- Content warning: Mention of drug use and overdose, bullying, and depression; mention of unsupportive family with LGBTQIA+ community; partner infidelity on-page (not main love story); includes early and frequent open-door love scenes between both a man and a woman and two women together.
- This book contains explicit sexual content, profanity, a very possessive/morally gray antihero, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers.--Book content warning after title page.
- His first, last, and only true love has always been rugby. Until now...Falling in love was the easy part, what comes next is the test..Friendship, first love, rising fame, horrifying secrets, and pain all fuel together as two teenagers from the opposite side of the tracks collide in Keeping 13, the concluding story for Johnny and Shannon. Based in Ireland, the Boys of Tommen series is bound to captivate and lure you into the world of rugby, love, and teenage heartbreak.*****
Warning ***Some scenes in this book may be extremely upsetting for some readers. Due to its bad language and certain scenes, Keeping 13 is recommended for mature readers. [red added for emphasis]**

Removal Options

While we recognize that it can be time-consuming and that library staff are already overburdened, removing warning labels and rating systems is pivotal to upholding the Library Bill of Rights. One reason that the task can be challenging is the inconsistent coding of these labels. They may appear in one or multiple fields (such as 521, 520, 500, and others) and can be added in different ways—sometimes as full field data, and other times embedded within existing field content (as shown above in red). This inconsistency makes identifying and removing these problematic additions cumbersome. Additionally, this should be an ongoing task as new materials are continually being added to the catalog.

Some options for cleaning up these statements include:

1. **Queries within the integrated library system (ILS) and global fixes**

If the library can identify the fields and data to remove, and depending on the capabilities of its ILS, data queries and global fixes can be applied. Appendices A and B below list common fields to review and suggest global deletions.

2. **Use of vendors and bibliographic profiles**

Libraries can work with vendors to set up profile preferences and update records in bulk. While this option involves a cost, it can save significant staff time if budgets allow. Two examples of vendors offering these services are Backstage Library Works and BestMARC.

3. **Manual review by library staff**

Records can be cleaned up one at a time by staff, though this is the most labor-intensive option.

Conclusion

As outlined by an ALA interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, rating and labeling systems used to warn customers about material content conflict with core tenets of the library profession. These practices can create a chilling effect on user access to materials and, when they stray from a viewpoint-neutral organizational system, introduce bias into our catalogs. Increasingly, these labels and ratings are being added without our awareness, making it critical for library staff to pay attention and to take action. By implementing strategies such as global fixes, vendor support, or manual review, we can ensure our catalogs remain neutral, accurate, and free from censorship. Protecting the integrity of our metadata is not just a technical task—it is a fundamental responsibility in upholding the values of our profession.

Appendix A: Common Fields to Review

	Field	Command	Data
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	teen
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	heavy themes
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	emotional abuse
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	self-harm
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	sexual
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	nudity
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	coarse language
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	mature
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	graphic scenes
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	suicide
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	violence
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	strong language
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	recommended for
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	grade
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	grades
Bibliographic	Note	Has	mature readers
Bibliographic	Note	Has	mature audience
Bibliographic	Note	Has	recommended reading age
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	"m"
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	"t"
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	appeals to
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	audience:
Bibliographic	Note	Has	content warning
Bibliographic	Note	Has	content note
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	and up
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	& up
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	reading age
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	disturbing images
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	gore
Bibliographic	Note	Has	nc-17
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	interest level
Bibliographic	Note	Has	reading level
Bibliographic	Note	Has	suitable for
Bibliographic	Note	Has	t+
Bibliographic	Note	Starts with	ot
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	t,
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	t.
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	tv
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	pg
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	m.

Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	ages
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	for teen audiences
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	young adult
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	for adult audiences
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	intended audience
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	mpaa
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	mpa
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	older
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	rated
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	adult
Bibliographic	Note	Has	explicit content
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	explicit
Bibliographic	Note	Has	parental advisory
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	aged
Bibliographic	Marc Field 521	Has	rating

Appendix B: Global Fix Commands

<i>Field Index</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Field Data Has</i>	<i>Function</i>
Note	521	teen	Delete
Note	521	adult	Delete
Note	521	age	Delete
Note	521	ages	Delete
Note	521	grade	Delete
Note	521	grades	Delete
Note	521	MPAA	Delete
Note	521	MPA	Delete
Note	521	rated	Delete
Note	521	rating	Delete
Note	521	older	Delete
Note	521	young adult	Delete
Note	521	appropriate	Delete
Note	521	sex	Delete
Note	521	nudity	Delete
Note	521	abuse	Delete
Note	521	violence	Delete
Note	521	language	Delete
Note	521	disturbing images	Delete
Note	521	gore	Delete
Note	521	suicide	Delete
Note	521	mature	Delete
Note	521	gore	Delete
Note	any	explicit	Delete
Note	any	parental advisory	Delete
Note	any	content warning	Delete
Note	any	content note	Delete