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Presentation Proposal

A Domain-Analytic Perspective on Sexual Health in LCSH and RVM

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Background

Knowledge organization in library and information science (LIS) is usually defined in the practical sense as “the nature and quality of such knowledge organizing processes as well as the knowledge organizing systems used to organize documents, document representations, works and concepts” (Hjørland 2008, 86). In this paper we discuss the relevance of domain-analysis for thinking about how the knowledge organizing processes and systems are connected to “the spaces and places in which informing is enacted and documents are created and used”. In particular, we discuss the relevance of domain-analysis for understanding the creation and use of indexing tools across cultural contexts. Specifically, we compare the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and the Répertoire de vedettes-matière (RVM) de l’Université Laval treatments of sexual health.

According to the World Health Organization (2006), sexual health encompasses the physical, emotional, mental and social states related to sexuality. However, as Giami (2002) argues, conceptions of sexual health differ depending on a country’s cultural and political contexts. As such, we find this topic a useful space to analyse how cultural domains affect the creation and use of knowledge organisation systems. LCSH has been said, notably by Olson (2000), to reflect an American vision containing numerous biases, where “the norm [...] is white, Christian (often specifically Protestant,) male, and straight (heterosexual)” (Marshall 1972). Conversely, RVM, as an adaptation for the Franco-Canadian context, modifies LCSH to meet the users’ cultural understandings. As such, we will discuss below how the treatment of sexual health in this indexing tool differs from LCSH.

Theoretical framework

Domain-analysis is a perspective that is gaining a significant focus in LIS research. This perspective suggests that a valuable way to understand information in LIS and related fields is to study knowledge domains, which includes an investigation of knowledge organization, structure, cooperation patterns, language and communications

forms, information systems, and relevance criteria. As domain-analysis is concerned with the analysis of users and systems in the context of their communities and of their role in society, it is useful for thinking about how knowledge organization practices and systems are influenced by the spaces and places in which they are created and used. As Fry (2004, 2006) discusses, it is important that this analysis involves an understanding of how both epistemic communities (i.e., various thought or discourse communities, such as objectivist, rationalist, or pragmatic communities) and social communities (e.g., the influence of group membership, reputation building) influence domains. We find Bowker and Star's (1999) 'infrastructural inversion techniques' useful for examining both the epistemic and social factors influencing the creation and use of knowledge organisation systems. Hjørland (2002, p. 428) in fact states that Bowker and Star's (1999) work on classification is one of the only texts "that seriously considers the consequences of classifications and their social and ideological embeddedness".

Bowker and Star's infrastructural inversion techniques are intended for "reading' infrastructure and unfreezing some of its features" (Star, 1999, p. 384). Specifically, they ask us to investigate the following six characteristics of classifications: *ubiquity*, or the absolute saturation capacity of classifications; *materiality*, or their physical, material effects; *indeterminacy*, or the tendency to mediate our knowledge of the past through our current knowledge; *practical politics*, or the pragmatic reasons behind decisions to designate certain categories as visible or relevant and other categories as invisible or irrelevant; *convergence*, or the ways in which classifications and social worlds combine with each other through a process of mutual constitutions; and *resistance*, or the reality that is constructed through the categories that resist or remain visible. While Bowker and Star (1999) apply their methods specifically to classifications, their broad definition of classifications as "spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation[s] of the world" (1999, p. 10) aligns nicely with the broader definition of knowledge organization as "the social division of mental labor" (Hjørland, 2008, p. 86). As such, their infrastructural inversion techniques may be useful for reading other knowledge organization systems, such as LCSH and RVM.

Methods

In this investigation we apply three of the authors' techniques - practical politics, convergence, and resistance, as described above - to the treatment of sexual health LCSH and RVM. Our data consists of subject headings (index terms) contained in LCSH and RVM that describe concepts related to sexual health. We first examine all of the policies and standards related to the design of these subject heading lists and also these subject headings in terms of relationships (equivalence, hierarchical and associative) to one another (practical politics). To see how the concept of sexual health is framed depending on domain, we compare the constructions of sexual health in LCSH, which is an example of an anglo-centric domain, to RVM, which is an example of a franco-centric domain (convergence). Finally, we examine the evolution of sexual health subject headings in LCSH and RVM as compared to current discourses on sexual health in their respective domains (resistance).

Results

Our analysis indicates that in general both LCSH and RVM focus on the physical aspects of sexuality, as opposed to the emotional, mental, and social aspects that are also presented in the World Health Organization's definition of sexual health. However, RVM offers a broader conceptualization of sexual health than LCSH. In RVM, the syndetic structure of "santé sexuelle", for instance, includes relationships to birth and sexual exercises, while the syndedic structure of "sexual health" in LCSH is merely related to sexually transmitted diseases. Our analysis indicates that the reasoning for these differences depend on practical politics, convergence, and resistance factors. For instance, in terms of practical politics, our analysis indicates, as Olson (2000) discusses, that the use of literary warrant in LCSH introduces an American bias into the indexing tool. Further, as Olson (2000) also suggests, we found that LCSH often uses literary warrant only when it echoes a mainstream viewpoint. In terms of sexual health, we found that the terms in LCSH did not reflect contemporary literary warrant, but an antiquated perspective of this topic. The attitude adopted by RVM in this respect tends to be more inclusive of marginal viewpoints.

Conclusion

In this presentation we examine two knowledge organization systems, LCSH and RVM according to the strategies of infrastructural inversion offered by Bowker and Star (1999). Our findings suggest that domain-analysis and in particular the infrastructural inversion techniques offered by Bowker and Star (1999), offer a useful perspective for analyzing how knowledge organization systems reflect the spaces and places in which informing is enacted and how these systems are created and used.

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