

Social Discovery Tools: Cataloguing Meets User Convenience

Abstract: The paper discusses (a) the ethical dimensions of creating catalogue records to reflect user convenience, (b) the relationship between culture and user convenience, and (c) how social discovery tools can facilitate the creation of interactive and flexible catalogue records that reflect the culture(s) and needs of their library communities.

Résumé : Cet article traite (a) des dimensions éthiques de la création de notices bibliographiques pour refléter l'utilité perçue par les usagers, (b) des relations entre la culture et l'utilité perçue par les usagers et (c) des moyens pour les outils de découverte sociaux de faciliter la création de notices bibliographiques interactives et flexibles reflétant la ou les cultures et les besoins de l'ensemble des usagers de la bibliothèque.

1. Introduction

In the past few years, library discovery systems, such as AquaBrowser (<http://www.medialab.nl/>), BiblioCommons (<http://www.bibliocommons.com/>), and Encore (<http://encoreforlibraries.com/>) have made important strides in providing an enhanced search and discovery experience for the users. These discovery systems have social-type Web 2.0 features that allow users to enhance the content of catalogue records by adding their own tags, ratings, and reviews. These new social discovery systems can play an important role in helping information professionals meet one of the primary underlying principles of cataloguing, namely that catalogue records be designed with the user in mind (IFLA, 2009) and that, whenever possible, to place the needs of clients above other concerns (Koehler & Pemberton, 2000). Hoffman argues that the principle of user convenience is beneficial because “it places users at the center of cataloging and instructs catalogers to keep their users in mind. It gives catalogers the freedom and power to adapt standards to meet local users’ needs, and helps them adhere to their codes of ethics” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 633). This principle assumes that cataloguers can objectively determine users’ needs and will know how to customize catalogue records to meet these needs. Cataloguers, however, “cannot effectively customize bibliographic records, because they do not know who their specific users are and cannot articulate their users’ needs” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 635).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between the principle of user convenience and social discovery systems. More specifically, the paper will focus on the following topics: (a) the ethical dimensions of creating catalogue records to reflect user convenience, (b) the relationship between culture and user convenience, and (c) how social discovery tools can facilitate the creation of interactive and flexible catalogue records that reflect the culture(s) and needs of the library communities in which they exist.

2. The Principle of User Convenience

The information professions take pride in their client-oriented approach. Koehler and Pemberton (2000) examined the codes of ethics of 37 associations of information professions; while the contents of these codes varied, they agree that a primary duty of information professionals is to respond to the information and other related needs of the patron or client.-product, space and time. Focusing on users and meeting their needs is an important ethical principle of cataloguing. Intner suggests that the goal of libraries is to serve their patrons and that Cutter's objects of the catalogue embody the aims of cataloguing, namely, that “cataloging operations should produce data that identify individual items and collocate related items” (Intner, 2003, p. 72). Cutter (1904) instructed cataloguers to put the convenience of the public before their own needs. The IFLA statement of international cataloguing principles (IFLA 2009) posits that nine principles direct the construction of cataloguing codes: Convenience of the user, common usage, representation, accuracy, sufficiency and necessity, significance, economy, consistency and standardization, and integration. Of these nine, the most important principle is that catalogue records be designed with the user in mind.

3. The cultural context of user convenience

In her discussion of the ethical imperatives for knowledge organization and representation, Beghtol (2002, 2005) refers to the concept of *cultural warrant*, which suggests that any knowledge organization or representational system should reflect the assumptions, values, and predispositions of the culture(s) in which it exists. Included in cultural warrant is the principle of *user warrant*, wherein individuals are considered to be members of a certain culture(s) and represent that culture(s) when they participate in the development and use of knowledge organization systems. A corollary to cultural warrant is the concept of *hospitality* which, in the field of knowledge organization, has been used to refer to the ability of a classification system to accommodate new concepts and new relationships amongst existing concepts. Beghtol extends this traditional notion of hospitality to that of *cultural hospitality*, wherein knowledge organization systems allow for personal and community choices (Beghtol, 2002, 2005).

4. Social Discovery Systems, User Convenience, and Cultural Warrant

The main barriers to the creation of catalogue records that incorporate the principles of user convenience and cultural warrant are (a) determining and reflecting the needs and cultural warrant of the users, and (b) maintaining the quality and integrity of the catalogue records. Social discovery systems may help address cataloguers' lack of (a) sufficient understanding of user convenience and cultural warrant, and (b) time to customize records to accommodate these two principles. When users add metadata to existing catalogue records in the form of tags, ratings, or reviews, they are given the opportunity to express both their needs and their cultural points-of-view. Social discovery systems are a way to engage the library community with library staff, since users can interact with catalogue records and add their own metadata to reflect their needs and cultural warrants. Library staff can learn more about the members of the library community by examining tags, ratings and reviews, and create collections and services, such as Readers' Advisory, that more closely reflect the needs of the users. Social discovery systems can also enhance the role of the catalogue as a communication mechanism amongst the users themselves. User-assigned tags and reviews can help members of the library community connect with one another via shared interests and connections that may not be otherwise possible via the catalogue record that is created

and controlled solely by the cataloguer. Social discovery systems can thus provide cataloguers with a way to interact, if indirectly, with users, since cataloguers can observe user-created metadata.

5. Conclusion

Although placing clients above other concerns is the primary principle of most information professions, incorporating this principle into cataloguing practice is hampered by cataloguers' lack of knowledge of user needs; even if these needs were understood better, cataloguers often lack the time and resources to create catalogue records to meet these needs. Social discovery systems provide cataloguers with the opportunity to not only learn more about client needs, but to mitigate the time and cost needed to create customized catalogue records. User-contributed metadata in the form of tags, ratings, or reviews, provide cataloguers with the opportunity to observe directly how users interact with catalogue records and adapt them to meet their needs. Social discovery systems can serve as a bridge between cataloguers' desire to create accurate catalogue records that conform to accepted cataloguing standards, and their ethical imperative to ensure that these records meet the needs of the clients. User-contributed metadata provide user with the opportunity to express their needs and cultural warrant and may thus serve also to increase users' interaction with each other and library staff via the catalogue.

The library catalogue has, until very recently, been controlled and hierarchical in structure, where information is imparted from library staff to the users: Users have been the passive recipients and users of the library catalogue. As social discovery systems continue to be implemented across public and academic libraries in North America, it will be interesting to examine their impact on cataloguing practice and the extent to which they will encourage and facilitate the principle of user convenience.

References

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