Negotiating normative institutional pressures and maintaining legitimacy in a complex work environment: A multiple case study of three academic cataloging units

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ABSTRACT

The user-centered approach to understanding information use and users has shaped research in library and information science (LIS). User-centered research has contributed to work in libraries, including work in reference, youth services, adult services, and management. User-centered research that contributes to cataloging work, on the other hand, has been minimal. Cataloging is specialized work that focuses on providing access to library materials using standards developed by the library profession. Catalogers follow standards in order to be efficient in their jobs. In a user-centered environment, however, catalogers also are told to focus on users and adapt standards to meet users’ needs.

This paper presents the results of multiple case study research performed in 2006-2007 to understand how catalogers negotiate the pressure to adhere to cataloging standards and the pressure to meet users’ needs. New institutional theory—specifically, DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of normative institutional pressure—served as a framework for the study.

The results suggest that standards and users are bound together. Catalogers believe strongly in the importance of standards and users, but standards guide the behavior of cataloging units. To follow standards is to meet users’ needs. The results also suggest cataloging administrators shape and redefine the normative institutional pressures of standards and users to respond to the organizational pressures of work efficiency and professional legitimacy. In addition, the results suggest that the pressures of efficiency and legitimacy have led cataloging units to redefine their work. As cataloging units gain efficiency, they lose work and legitimacy. They need to claim new work to maintain legitimacy and remain relevant to their libraries and universities. Consequently, they are changing what it means to do cataloging.