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The research project I am undertaking examines a number of issues surrounding the quality management of the bibliographic metadata of e-books in higher education libraries within the UK. I am exploring the key processes conducted, both by libraries and e-book suppliers, and the professional relationships between these parties. Within my PhD, I aim to make recommendations to improve the current situation, but also to consider more theoretical aspects, concerning attitudes towards quality management and the value of cataloguing.

The Research Problem

E-book usage is increasing; they are available in 90% of academic libraries worldwide, and, before the pandemic, 40% of academic libraries operated a digital first policy (ProQuest, 2016). Within the UK, e-book usage by full time students rose by 77% between the 2013/14 and 2016/17 academic years (SCONUL, 2018). Spending on e-books in UK academic libraries is increasing, and this has been accelerated by the pandemic, with 57% of book budgets being spent on digital content (ProQuest, 2021). A major factor in the justification for spending on e-books is whether they are value for money in terms of usage, and discoverability is crucial to this (Conyers et al., 2017). E-books are increasingly purchased in large packages, with these possibly containing thousands of titles. Constraints on staff numbers and time, as well as the sheer scale of the packages, make it unfeasible to individually catalogue these titles (Sapon-White, 2014; Steele & Foote, 2011).

The issue is negated by loading large batches of vendor-supplied bibliographic records into Library Management Systems, so that they are visible to users on the library catalogue (Belanger, 2007; Martin, Dzierba, Fields, & Roe, 2011; Mugridge & Edmunds, 2012). This then poses a critical problem with the quality of the metadata, as it can vary greatly depending on the supplier (Traill, 2013; Walters, 2013; Zhang & Jin, 2014).

Literature Review

A rise in library consortia has led to an increase in consortial e-book purchasing (Polanka, 2011). Within the UK there are seven main regional consortia, through which academic libraries work together (SCONUL, 2020). There is literature concerning cooperative cataloguing practices within North American library consortia, and how these reduce the duplication of workloads (Mugridge, 2013; Young, 2012), but there is very little written about the situation in the UK.

The bibliographic records are often provided for free by suppliers, as part of an e-book package, but questions are being asked about whether they are creating extra costs in the staff time that it takes to improve them (Martin & Mundle, 2010; Rossmann, Foster, & Babbitt, 2009).

Libraries are often opting to improve records in retrospect unless there are critical errors; this is conducted by batch loading them, and then relying on issues being reported by library patrons or other library staff (Beall, 2009; Booth, 2020; Traill, 2013; Van Kleeck et al., 2016).

There are calls for better cooperation between libraries and suppliers regarding bibliographic metadata, and there are suggestions that national organisations such as Jisc or SCONUL could help facilitate this (Bascones & Staniforth, 2018).

With the streamlining of services, and budget constraints, as well as significant changes to the practice of cataloguing, there are questions being asked about the value of cataloguing, and, where it has previously been viewed as an art of creating perfect records, in the changing environment there are some tensions surrounding whether good enough should be just good enough (Cerbo, 2011; Payant, Skeen, & Woolcott, 2017).

Libraries are taking a more networked approach to collections, not just in terms of the increase in e-resources, but consortia are looking more at shared print collections, and shared storage facilities, for legacy physical stock (Dempsey, Malpas, & Lavoie, 2014). There is also an increase in union catalogues, at a regional level and at a national level, such as the National Bibliographic Knowledgebase, formed by Jisc in the UK (Cousins, 2019; Dempsey, 2012). There are limitations to sharing some bibliographic records through these channels, because of licencing restrictions often put in place by metadata suppliers. Jisc are working on Plan M to improve the bibliographic metadata ecosystem by looking at how much it costs different stakeholders to create and improve records, with the targeted outcome of making it easier for libraries to obtain, enhance, and then re-share records (Jisc, 2019). After a consultation process, an agreement has been reached with OCLC on the sharing of their records within the NBK (Grindley, 2022).

Research design

The research is a qualitative study that is constructivist in approach, with data collection, transcription, and analysis occurring concurrently, and the categories that are emerging then informing data collection. I am working with two different library consortia in the UK and some of the e-book and metadata suppliers that provide resources for them - to date I have had research conversations with 22 participants including senior managers in academic libraries, cataloguing staff at the same libraries, and members of the metadata teams at three different e-book suppliers.

Research questions

- i) What are the workflows and supply chains for the quality management of bibliographic metadata of e-books in UK higher education library consortia?
- ii) What are the relationships and interactions between key actors in the supply chain of e-book metadata and how does this relate to notions of quality and quality management?
- iii) How is the value of cataloguing and bibliographic metadata regarded by key actors and how does this relate to their perceptions of their role?
- iv) How do the pressures and influences on the workflows and actors involved in e-book metadata relate to the reshaping of library roles and collections?
- v) In what ways are key actors involved in communities of practice and what are the structures and norms of these communities?
- vi) What impact has the Covid-19 pandemic had on the quality management of e-book metadata and how many of these effects could be permanent?
- vii) How do ongoing changes to the international bibliographic metadata ecosystem impact on quality management for individual institutions?

In terms of the research questions for the project, I have tried to keep a balance between the practical and the theoretical, questions i) and ii) being focussed on the practicalities of quality management, such as workflows and interactions between parties, and questions iii), iv), and v) having an emphasis on the more theoretical aspects, such as notions of quality, perceptions of roles, and how changes in the wider sector relate to those in e-book metadata.

As my research approach is constructivist, my research questions are evolving with the data collection and analysis, so question 6 has been added because the pandemic and its effects have been prominent in the research conversations that I have had so far. Question 7 has been included because it is becoming clearer during my research that the metadata ecosystem is constantly evolving, with projects such as Plan M, the work of the National Acquisitions Group and SUPC, and the NISO report on E-book Bibliographic Metadata Requirements.

Preliminary findings

As transcription and analysis has progressed, a number of themes have emerged, which I will discuss in this section.

Striving for quality

Participants who work for e-book aggregators recognise the importance of maintaining standards, but feel that it is an issue that all actors in the metadata ecosystem need to work on together to improve. The process of obtaining metadata from publishers is described as messy because it is sent in a variety of formats and varies in standard. There is a sense that nobody has a good enough overview to be able to provide all of the metadata required by e-book aggregators in order for them to create the records that they deliver to libraries:

“One data source isn’t enough right? I think that’s really where I’ve come down on it at this point. No one sees enough of the picture to actually have that one data source whether it’s the publisher or OCLC or some provider, they can’t see it all. So quality management and quality control involves multiple data points coming in so we can validate and confirm off them”

- Interviewee K (E-book Aggregator Representative)

Many participants mention the report of the National Acquisitions Group that highlights the necessity of having an established minimum standard for shelf-ready records provided through the Joint Consortia Framework Agreement. There appears to be a consensus that defining a perfect record is impossible because each institution has its own requirements but that a record that meets a certain fitness for purpose could be achievable.

Cataloguing staff express concern about the quality of some of the records they receive. Some participants use the Alma’s Community Zone and feel that the quality is variable:

“Some of the Community Zone records are fine and others are less good, they’re getting better I think but certainly up to a year ago a lot of them were quite poor...we take it unless it’s truly awful and sometimes it is truly awful.”

- Interviewee E (Metadata Librarian)

Changing perceptions

As already mentioned earlier in this article, the shift to digital first is something that was being implemented before the pandemic, but the changes brought about by it have accelerated this switch. Participants from libraries and e-book suppliers reported an increase in spending on e-books, with some institutions receiving extra funding to cope with the demand for e-resources that has occurred because of the pandemic.

Senior managers in libraries have stated that there has been a shift in student perceptions of digital collections, as they were previously considered to be added extras to print stock. Students across all subject areas have had to adapt and have been engaging more with e-books because of the restricted access to libraries that was a result of national lockdowns:

“Last year we obviously have had click and collect like most university libraries and what we did was map what people were borrowing in print and for the most part, none of it was available electronically so what students were obviously doing was looking for the electronic first”

- Interviewee A (Head of Library Services)

The moves towards digital collections do face some barriers; participants discussed shrinking library budgets coupled with the challenging e-book market in terms of pricing and unavailability of some titles in a digital format.

Assessing workflows

The data collected shows that e-book suppliers are often not the producers of metadata but receive it in a variety of formats including ONIX and Excel from publishers and other providers, and then work to improve it and enhance it for libraries. Basic or brief records are being created through automation by e-book suppliers, but some enhancements such as subject headings and authorities are being carried out by hand by their cataloguing teams.

Several participants from libraries discussed the importance of having shelf-ready records from suppliers and that this automation means that cataloguing staff can concentrate on value-added elements and other projects such as special collections. The instantaneousness of e-books means that libraries are more likely to want the records as soon as e-books are live on their systems; this can mean receiving a brief record from suppliers and then obtaining a fuller record once it is available.

An issue that is prominent in terms of making it easier for libraries to obtain, enhance, and then re-share records is restrictive licencing, which hinders the collaborative cataloguing efforts of Jisc’s NBK. After a consultation process, as part of Plan M a national agreement has been negotiated with OCLC on the sharing of their records within the NBK. Cataloguing staff recognise that there is a price for creating records:

“We’re not expecting anyone to give metadata away for free, there is a cost to producing it, no-one disputes that, the challenge is to review the existing licences and come up with a fairer way of libraries being able to pay for the metadata but then to have the right to put it where they need it to be.”

– Interviewee B (Metadata Librarian)

Maintaining relationships

Relationships between cataloguing staff in academic libraries and metadata suppliers generally seem strong and positive, but errors in records are not always being reported back.

This participant recognised the long term benefits of reporting errors back; mainly that suppliers might improve their metadata. However, they questioned the feasibility of doing this when there are pressures to make e-books accessible as soon as possible. They felt it was often more efficient to fix the problem themselves:

"I tend to just get on with it and tidy it myself rather than complain that it's been bad...if I've got a bad record in front of me I can just do it, I can access the e-book, I can do the record and then it's on our system, it's working, it's fine...long term if you're reporting this back to the supplier you'd hope in the long run then they might start providing better quality, but in the short term, it's already in our catalogue however bad it is, I want to fix it now so that tomorrow someone can access it properly and find it"

- Interviewee Q (Metadata Librarian)

Another issue raised was that the process of reporting errors back to suppliers is quite disjointed, because the contact that libraries have with suppliers is often someone in the sales team, who may not understand the finer details of metadata. Both library staff and e-book suppliers recognised that communication can be clunky and at times old-fashioned with emails back and forth, tick boxes for requirements, and cataloguers having walkthroughs of records to take feedback. There were questions raised as to whether some of these processes could be streamlined.

Collaborating and speaking out

Staff at e-book suppliers stated that members of their cataloguing teams were involved with industry partners, Jisc, and the CILIP's Metadata and Discovery Group to share best practice and improve standards. These participants also reported that they were on various NISO committees, and that this was an integral part of working to improve standards and workflows.

Participants from libraries felt that being part of a consortium gave them a stronger voice, and that they were able to build better links with colleagues at other institutions - some cataloguing staff in particular felt that having connections within a consortium made them less of a voice in the wilderness.

Senior managers also spoke about the advantages of getting the voice of their institution heard in the wider community and being able to have strategic conversations with suppliers that can be steered in ways that will be beneficial.

Advocating the value of cataloguing

Several participants questioned whether people outside the cataloguing department appreciate its value and talked about convincing colleagues of the importance of it. There is a notion that there is a lack of awareness of how metadata and records are created and uploaded to the LMS.

Many senior managers reflected on the work of cataloguers and how it is perceived by the wider library team. Participants felt that perhaps more could be done to raise the understanding of what the cataloguing department does. There was very much a notion that it is a hidden service, because it is not front and centre.

Cataloguing staff felt that the value of their work was not assumed, and that they often had to fight their corner. It was felt that senior management had many pressures, and other more measurable projects such as reading list systems, so they may not have the brain space to consider metadata.

However, this Head of Library Services was able to elaborate on why cataloguing is undervalued, and why it is so important in terms of it providing access to the resources that are at the heart of what a library service delivers to its users.

“I think cataloguing is almost potentially undervalued by a lot of services because to me a library service is about providing users with access to information...that provision of information is no good if people can't find things and know what you've got and be able to access them, securely, safely, easily. All of those things run from a basic premise of understanding what you've got which is described in the catalogue record.”

- Interviewee C (Head of Library Services)

These themes will continue to develop along with others as my research progresses. Data collection will run until the end of April, with the final thesis being submitted next December.

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