Library & Information Science Research

Driven adaptation: A grounded theory study of licensing electronic resources

Xiaohua Zhu

School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, 451 Communications Bldg., 1345 Circle Park Drive, Knoxville, TN 37996-0341, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Using the grounded theory approach, this study generated a substantive theory of driven adaptation that explains and theorizes the basic social process of licensing as an emerging specialization in the library field that is driven by three major forces: imposed changes, tensions, and dialog. Licensing librarians use three major strategies to adapt to licensing work: coping, positioning, and aligning. Each strategy includes multiple dimensions. As the outcome of the driven adaptation, licensing work has emerged as a new specialization in academic librarianship. The theory explains the major concerns in the licensing work: how licensing librarians adapt to licensing work and how they handle the challenges in this relatively new specialization. It also identifies the behaviors practitioners engage in as they cope with licensing work. Findings of this study can help new electronic resources librarians to adapt to licensing more effectively. This theory can also be expanded and generalized to explain the creation and assimilation of any new specialization of work.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Compared to many other established areas of library practice, licensing electronic resources is relatively new. It became a common practice in academic libraries in the late 1990s when scholarly publishing gradually moved from paper to electronic distribution systems. Because of the easy-to-distribute nature of electronic information and the inability of copyright law to regulate such distribution, content providers (including publishers, vendors, and information aggregators) employed another existing mechanism, site licensing, as a handy solution for handling electronic resource transactions. Under the licensing model, libraries cannot buy and own digital information products as they do copies of printed works; rather, they merely purchase the access and use rights of these products on behalf of their patrons. Since the late 1990s, academic libraries have begun to spend more of their acquisition budgets on electronic resources, including e-books, e-journals, and other digital materials. In the fiscal year of 2010–2011, Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions in the United States spent an average of 65% of their materials budgets on electronic resources (Kyrillidou, Morris, & Roebuck, 2012, p. 56). In the fiscal year of 2012, US academic libraries in total spent 74.7% of their serials budgets on electronic subscriptions (Phan, Hardesty, & Hug, 2014, p. 12). As the number of electronic resources increases, the role of licensing has grown increasingly important.

Licensing work refers to librarians' practice of acquiring electronic resources from content providers, including handling trials and orders;

reviewing, interpreting, and managing license agreements; negotiating with content providers regarding license terms and clauses; and other activities related to acquisition. Within an academic library, usually one or a few librarians are responsible for licensing work, and are often called by their peers licensing librarians, even though licensing librarian does not often appear as an official job title. These librarians most often hold the title of electronic resources librarian, but not every electronic resources librarian handles licensing work. In fact, the professional activities of electronic resources management have not been well defined, and the position of electronic resources librarian may be just another passing trend in librarianship (Downes & Rao, 2007). The actual title of the licensing librarian depends on how licensing and electronic resources management workflow is arranged in the particular library (Miller, 2007)—it can be electronic resources coordinator, electronic services librarian, collection development librarian, or serials librarian, to name just a few. More often than not, licensing is only one of this librarian's many job responsibilities. As early as 1999, ARL recommended having a "single resident expert coordinator" for licensing (Soete, 1999, p. II). In the present research, licensing librarian is used to refer specifically to those librarians whose responsibilities include licensing work.

2. Problem statement

Although licensing has been practiced for almost two decades, and librarians have been reporting and discussing licensing-related issues and best practices via various venues (from e-mail listservs to journal articles and textbooks), there is no theoretical discussion of overall licensing work in the library profession. Facing various challenges arising

E-mail address: xzhu12@utk.edu.

from expanded information channels and emerging electronic publishing models, academic libraries are still adjusting their organizational structures and workflows to improve information access. A deeper, more theoretical understanding of licensing can bring insights to library and information science (LIS) theories and education and to the management of individual libraries, and can also help to prepare libraries for other new emerging specializations that are like to appear. To those ends, this paper reports a substantive theory of driven adaptation derived from a grounded theory study of how licensing librarians experience licensing work and respond to changes, how they define their identities and roles, and what the factors are that influence these variables.

3. Literature review

In the LIS literature, licensing is a widely discussed topic in the area of electronic resources management. Richards (2001) traced the mentioning of licenses in the LIS literature from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. He found that before 1990, licensing was mentioned primarily regarding access to microcomputer software and commercial online services. In 1990, works began to appear on licenses for CD-ROM products and tape-loaded databases. Starting in 1994, licensing was discussed in the context of remote access to electronic journals, as with the TULIP project, and access to other remote networked resources. After that, especially since 1997, more works on licensing appeared.

Indeed, the late 1990s and the early 2000s produced a great amount of literature on licenses and licensing. Most of it was written by the earliest licensing librarians, including important authors such as Okerson, T. L. Davis, and Duranceau. They focused on various practical issues associated with licensing electronic resources. Some authors shared and discussed their experiences with the painstaking license negotiation process (Allen, 1997; Buchanan, 1997; Davis, 1999; Duranceau, 1997). They identified the most controversial or problematic contract terms for licensing librarians, including definitions of uses and users, long-term access, licensor's obligation to perform, duration of contract, warranties and liability, remedies, governing law and dispute resolution, security and usage monitoring, costs, service and support, and confidentiality (Davis, 1997; Davis & Reilly, 1998; Kara, Caputo, & Davis, 1995; Okerson, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). This literature is not only a record of the best practice of licensing at the time, but also remains relevant to current licensing practice.

More recently, interests in the area of electronic resources seem to have shifted from licensing (the acquisition of e-resources) to other aspects of the management and use of electronic resources, such as workflows, electronic resources management systems (ERMS), and usage statistics. The focus of licensing literature has also shifted from summarizing issues, problems, and best practices to concerns with standardization—using model licenses and streamlining the licensing processes (Cave, Green, & Martin, 2007; Cox, 2000; Duranceau, 2003; Green, 2005; Hahn, 2006; Jewell, Davis, Grover, & Grogg, 2007). Studies of the responsibilities and qualifications of electronic resources librarians have also provided insights into licensing work (Albitz & Shelburne, 2007; Downes & Rao, 2007; Fisher, 2003; Sutton, 2011). Furthermore, the publication of *Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians* by North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG, 2013) represented a culmination of efforts in recognizing and defining electronic resources management. The shift in research trends and the adoption of professional standards indicate a certain degree of stabilization of licensing work.

In 2007, Miller published an overview that summarized licensing practices in the library organizational structure, describing many common best practices in licensing and pointing out challenges and opportunities in terms of workflow issues and licensing term issues. This appears to be the first time that licensing was recognized in the literature as a specialization (Miller, 2007); however, there was no

elaboration on organizational change from a theoretical perspective. In fact, few studies on licensing or, more broadly, electronic resources management, have a theoretical perspective. Most of the literature deals with changes (including workflow changes and role changes) from an administrative point of view or practice perspective.

Although few studies on licensing have a theoretical perspective, organizational theories have often been used in LIS practice and research. Most of the classic texts on library management incorporate organizational theories to address library-specific organizational management (Evans & Ward, 2007; Rizzo, 1980; Stueart & Moran, 1998). In general, the classic texts and more recent organizational studies use a top-down approach, borrowing and applying theories to understand library practice and organizational changes. By contrast, specific organizational theories are not used in the present study to guide the exploration of licensing practice. A bottom-up approach is used because existing theories may not necessarily fit with licensing practice and because the goal is to understand the field from the field itself—to generate concepts (and further, model and theory) from grounded data and from the practicing librarians who conduct licensing work.

It is also important to note that, unlike much of the literature reviewed here, a grounded theory approach does not result in a summary of best practices in the field. Narratives and descriptions of licensing practice have appeared in handbooks, guidelines, and various journal articles. Instead, this is an attempt to reveal the state of licensing work and licensing librarians by theorizing licensing as a new division of work, or a new specialization in librarianship. It uses grounded data to understand the field and theorize the major concerns and issues in the field. The purpose is to deepen understanding of licensing and of the organizational changes in academic libraries in an information environment increasingly dominated by electronic resources and services. Such understanding will contribute to the theoretical work concerning academic libraries in general as well as provide insights into the issues that arise when reorganizing library workflows around electronic resources.

4. Methodology

To theorize licensing work using data generated from the field, this study employed the grounded theory approach first introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later further developed by these two (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Strauss, 1987) and other theorists, such as Charmaz and Corbin (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although all rely on grounded data and inductive methods to generate theories, these theorists hold different logics. For example, Glaser (1992) criticized Strauss and Corbin (1990) for forcing data instead of allowing it to emerge. Charmaz's (2006) work represents a new direction of grounded theory: the researcher assumes that data and theories are not discovered, but are constructed by the researcher and research participants. The present study follows the classic (Glaserian) grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978, 1992). This approach is especially suitable because licensing is still a relatively new research area that lacks theoretical and systematic analyses. Therefore, a good way to theorize licensing work is to systematically collect data from the field and use the collected data as the source for understanding, explaining, and generalizing the major concerns in the field, instead of forcing data into preconceived theoretical frameworks that often lack grounding in data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory techniques include data collecting, open coding, memoing, theoretical sampling, selective coding, memo sorting, and theoretical writing. The procedure of applying these methods is not a linear process, but a personal pace and a package (Glaser, 1998) of tools which the researcher has much flexibility in employing.

A grounded theory study begins with data collected from the field using any valid method. The interview method was used to collect data from the licensing field. Participants were recruited by multiple strategies, such as poster recruitment at professional conferences,