DCPAPERS
Proc. Int'l Conf. on Dublin Core and Metadata Applications 2017

Understanding Users' Metadata Needs: How Do We Know What They Want?

Presentation

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Keywords: library metadata; understanding user expectations; MARC

Abstract

Descriptive metadata should match users' expectations of the information that is available to search against. Some standard approaches to understanding user needs related to library metadata include usability tests on existing search interfaces, mining search logs and other similar sources for information about the search strategies that people use. Those strategies rarely separate the raw data from how the system uses it and they provide little data that contextualizes the users' choices of search terms. The methodology used for the research discussed in this presentation focuses on how users describe books outside of the context of an existing search interface. It represents an effort to isolate and identify salient types of information and then to compare them with library data and standards to determine how much users' descriptions and catalogers' descriptions overlap.

In the summer of 2016, the presenter ran pilot study to explore what types of information users' find most important for being able to find, identify, and select books. The six university students who participated were asked to write free-text descriptions of three books that would allow someone else to be able to find, identify, and decide whether or not they wanted to read the books. The free-text descriptions that participants wrote during the sessions were compared with MARC records that had been created for the same three books and were in the library's online catalog. The descriptions created by participants can be used to glimpse into the needs of users as they approach online search interfaces trying to find a resource of interest. The study focuses on the descriptive metadata itself, rather than on the effectiveness of the functionality created with that metadata. Additionally, by removing the search interface we can analyze two relatively similar descriptions that also provide comparable levels of contextual information.

This presentation will focus on an analysis of the methodology used in this and other similarly constructed studies, preliminary findings based on the data that was gathered during the pilot study, and ideas for how the type of information gathered through these types of studies could be used to assess metadata practices and inform the creation of descriptive metadata standards.

https://doi.org/10.23106/dcmi.952138058