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From anxiety to empowerment: supporting librarians develop copyright literacy

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Introduction

Copyright is a subject that increasingly has a major impact on the library and information profession, particularly as librarians create, preserve and provide access to digital collections. However, it is a subject that many librarians shy away from providing advice about. In higher education most universities now employ a copyright officer or nominate someone to be the copyright specialist to deal with queries of this nature. While it is highly valuable to build up expertise in the many complexities of copyright, this approach can create a gulf between library staff and the specialist copyright officer. The consequences are that many librarians feel justified in passing on their queries to their dedicated specialist and don't build up their knowledge and understanding in this field.

In this short article we present emerging findings from an exploratory study to examine librarians' experiences of copyright in their professional lives. We build on findings from a survey of librarians, information professionals and those in the cultural heritage sector carried out in 2014 (Morrison and Secker, 2015). The survey was largely quantitative, however some of the free text questions suggested that copyright could be a source of fear and anxiety. As Copyright Officers who find copyright a subject of fascination; the suggestion that our colleagues fear copyright queries was familiar, however we realised that no one had attempted to understand why this might be. Logic might tell us that because of the legal nature of the subject, some librarians might be reluctant to give advice for fear of 'getting it wrong' and being held responsible. However we were keen to discover what else might be going on. It seemed to us that understanding the source of this fear was key to knowing how to better equip librarians with the confidence to tackle copyright queries. This knowledge might also suggest better ways to design copyright training that helps people to acknowledge and confront their anxiety. Using a research method from the education field,

phenomenography, seemed a valuable way to explore this issue further. Phenomenography has been used increasingly in the information literacy field, to understand users experiences related to information literacy and it seemed an ideal method to help us understand copyright literacy.

The survey findings

The Copyright Literacy Survey was undertaken in the UK in December 2014 and was completed by over 600 library and information professionals. Our findings (Morrison and Secker, 2015) compared the copyright literacy of UK librarians favourably to countries around the world (Todorova et al, 2014). The UK was more likely to have a copyright officer within a library (63% of institutions said they did compared to 29% across four other countries), and the level of confidence amongst the cohort was generally considered to be good (57% were moderately or extremely aware of copyright issues). However, there were clear areas of knowledge which librarians felt more confident about, and a whole host of topics that librarians wanted to know more about, either as part of their professional qualifications or as continuing professional development. This part of the survey revealed some of the attitudes of librarians towards copyright, suggesting that it was a subject that created anxiety, due to its complexity and a perception that copyright laws changed fairly frequently. Following this study we recommended that additional qualitative research was undertaken to explore these issues further. We were also interested in the subject of copyright education. In an earlier ALISS Quarterly article (Morrison, 2015) the value of games in copyright education was discussed. Our experiences using Copyright the Card Game in training at our respective institutions and in several workshop for librarians, was that it was a highly effective method of learning. Games have been recognized as valuable for teaching 'difficult' subjects providing a 'safe space' and allowing people to work in groups helped librarians to share their knowledge and expertise with others. We had a sense that Copyright the Card Game was effective because of its ability to alleviate some of the anxiety around copyright, but no real evidence to back this up.

Using phenomenography

Phenomenography is a research method from the field of education, which has been used increasingly in information literacy research (Yates et al, 2012). This method seemed to offer something new and different to the copyright literacy survey we had carried out. It is concerned with understanding variation in people's experience of a phenomenon. It is underpinned by the idea that people collectively experience and understand phenomena in a number of qualitatively different but interrelated ways. Through the survey, and our own work, we were aware that copyright could polarise opinions amongst librarians. While some, like us, were excited and fascinated by a new copyright conundrum, many seemed anxious, perplexed, baffled, or even viewed it as an imposition on them.

Phenomenography is a qualitative research method, which involves collecting data from participants through open questions to explore their experiences of a phenomenon. Rather than asking questions of why, it focuses on how and what they do and their feelings. It is typical to conduct individual interviews, however

we were keen to try out the methodology and capture the experiences of a greater number of librarians, therefore we carried out group interviews.

Three group interviews were carried out with staff working in academic libraries. The staff were from a variety of roles and grades and unlike a focus group we were not seeking to get a consensus from the group, but to use open questions to understand the differences in people's experiences.

Each group interview was transcribed in full and the data analysis was undertaken using approaches outlined by Akerlind (Akerlind, 2005) which involved reading and re-reading the transcripts and searching for similarities and variations in experiences.

Emerging findings

Phenomenography involves the development of what are called 'Categories of Description. These are usually presented in an 'Outcome Space' which often suggests a hierarchy or relationship between the categories. Each category of description needs to be unique and the intention is to have as few categories as possible to describe the variation in experiences.

Our analysis is still ongoing and due to be presented at the European Conference on Information Literacy in October 2016. However, the findings suggest that for some librarians copyright can be a source of acute emotional tension. While this statement seems dramatic, it is clear from our data that many librarians feel that there is an inherent conflict in what they are seeking to achieve as a librarian and the requirements of the UK's copyright regime. Librarians want to help people and provide them with access to information, therefore they can feel conflicted personally when expected to police others' behaviour, or say no to an activity such as providing a copy of material in their collection due to copyright reasons.

Moving on from this, there are clearly some librarians who feel that copyright is a specialist subject that requires an expertise beyond what they have. They feel comfortable pointing people in the right direction of help and expertise but some librarians do not feel qualified to give advice themselves. Many comment on how they were not prepared for this while completing their library qualification and that it's such a complex subject, that they struggle to keep up to date with so to be able to offer advice to others.

Another group of librarians see their role as being one of copyright education, and some librarians feel confident giving advice about what specific areas of copyright. Areas such as open access, but also interpreting the Copyright Licensing Agency's (CLA) Higher Education Licence were mentioned as common topics that librarians will provide advice to users on. The focus here is often on providing advice to less knowledgeable colleagues with the intention of trying to change their behaviour. While many librarians don't feel comfortable policing or sanctioning other people's behaviour, some take quite a strong moral stance on their role as explaining the 'copyright rules' to others.

Finally at the highest end of our hierarchy is the experience of copyright as a collaborative process, where librarians build up their knowledge and work with users to help them interpret what the law and copyright exceptions might allow. This involves an understanding of risk, an understanding that there are not fixed rules around copyright in many areas, and that it is not their role to sanction and police others' behaviour but to work towards mutually satisfactory solutions. Librarians value the expertise of others and feel the collaborative and community approach to copyright, rather than a situation where they are directing others as the expert, is helpful.

Conclusions

We are still working on our findings, but the group interviews, carried out in January 2016 were incredibly helpful when writing a new set of guidance for libraries on copying, which is now available on the CopyrightUser website (http://copyrightuser.org/topics/libraries/). We hope that further analysis of the data and the formulation of the Outcome Space will help us work out not only what librarians need to know about copyright, but how best to teach them about it in a way that is empowering to them and the communities that they serve.

Librarians have important privileges in UK law which allow them to copy and provide access to material for specific purposes. We need professionals who are confident in the law, but also clear of their role in facilitating access to knowledge. The days of acting as a gatekeeper of information or copyright police officer are we hope coming to an end. But truly understanding copyright requires confidence and clarity, not fear and anxiety, something we hope we can instill across the library and information profession.

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