

Literature Review as Call to Action:

Addressing the Need for Evaluations of Subject Repositories

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There is a large gap in library and information science literature about subject and discipline repositories. Identifying the existing literature is even more difficult due to the numerous terms used to refer to subject repositories. A quick survey of popular subject repositories illustrates a multitude of terms: digital library, clearinghouse, e-print service, database, open access repository, archive, digital collection, and digital repository, among others. As their central service, all of these repositories (this term seems most inclusive) preserve and disseminate research in one or a few related disciplines, but their interfaces and site features are quite diverse. Terminology is a clear issue for repositories, and despite searching by all the terms above, there is still significantly less general literature on subject repositories than on institutional repositories and digital libraries in general. There is also a lack of solid broad evaluation of the usefulness of subject repositories. A short discussion of literature on subject repositories follows.

Subject Repositories vs. Institutional Repositories

It is widely acknowledged that authors prefer subject repositories to institutional repositories, despite a persistent effort to develop institution-specific repositories (Cervone, 2008; Kingsley, 2008). Because authors identify with their discipline rather than the university social system, they are more likely to use a subject repository that explicitly collects in their research area. The only broad evaluations of subject repositories are framed in relation to other subject repositories, or in relation to institutional repositories. It is thus difficult to understand the full impact that open access subject repositories have had on their respective fields. Neither is it easy to see their utility in relation to other technologies or

services that would assist in the preservation and dissemination of research.

Obstacles to Use

The literature identifies a number of issues with subject repository adoption. Cervone (2008) attributes low adoption rates of digital repositories to their traditionally “library-centric focus”. Libraries, which are typically repository builders, tend to make technical decisions based on ease of implementation rather than the needs of the user. As a result, users may find repository systems difficult to navigate. Kingsley (2008) identifies several deterrents to institutional repository use that may also be relevant for subject repositories. The terminology of repositories (pre-prints, for example) is library-centric and difficult for authors to understand. Other issues that are confusing and time-consuming include dealing with file formats and navigating copyright (Kingsley, 2008). Finally, authors may be less inclined to submit work to subject repositories if they believe the collections have too few materials, or the collections are not growing at a quick enough rate (Qing and Ruhua, 2008).

Recommendations

An author or user’s discipline largely influences acceptance of repositories, and certain disciplines will adopt repositories more readily than others depending on the publishing and output behaviors expected by that field (Kingsley 2008). As a result, repository creators should be aware of the research and output habits of the discipline(s) they are targeting. Cervone (2008) advocates for “contextualized digital repositories” that are created to address specific needs of a user group. Fox (2004) echoes these concerns when he writes that digital libraries should be user-centered and that digital library software should be constructed to support research and teaching activities. Qing and Ruhua (2008) also call for more tailored features in repository systems. They write that across all subject repositories, more search and browse features are needed.

It can be drawn from the literature that moving away from a library-centric focus and towards a disciplinary and user-centered focus is necessary when building a repository. Despite the success of subject repositories relative to institutional repositories, there is an enormous need for large-scale evaluations of subject repositories as tools. Without such studies, building a useful subject repository that responds to relevant needs is a challenging task.

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