Resistance and Possibility: Rethinking the Concept of Subject Access from Queer Theoretical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT
This session will use queer theory to raise important questions about the role of information science in relation to queer communities. Using examples taken from both literary and popular culture, the session will look at the practices of classification in information systems, and how those practices, even when they attempt to facilitate access to resources for LGBTQ communities, ignore disjunctions and distortions that, far from being a barrier to access, form a fundamental aspect of queer expression.

Keywords
Queer theory, gender, sexuality

INTRODUCTION
Ever since the heyday of Sanford Berman (1971), the information studies community has been aware of the disjunction between the bureaucratic procedures of subject access on an international scale on the one hand, and the needs and requirements of marginalized communities on the other. In the case of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities, such disjunctions led to numerous efforts to revise the Library of Congress Subject Headings to remove and revise outdated headings (Greenblatt 1990), and to revise the structure and terminology used in the major classification systems (Christensen 2010). Such efforts assumed implicitly that service to LGBTQ communities involved extending to them the same accuracy and consistency of subject access that were offered to mainstream communities. Consistency and regularity were considered the cardinal virtues of good cataloguing: as David Levy stated, such virtues are the result of “a highly skilled interpretative activity by which the properties of items are not simply described, but stabilized and even created. … This regular structure is the output of catalogers, not the input (Levy 1995).

The growing impact of critical and post-structuralist theory upon information studies has dramatically altered our attitudes towards these standards of consistency and uniformity. Theorists such as Foucault have addressed the underlying power structures in bureaucratic procedures, and have suggested that the escape from such procedures is more complex than we might at first think, requiring complex interplays of speech and silence (1990, 45), as well as close analysis of the surfaces of emergence and grids of specification involved in discursive formations (2010). Theories of gender and sexuality, in particular, flaunt these laudable principles of access, by frequently presenting gender and sexuality as

[an] open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning [which arise] when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically (Sedgwick 1993, 8)

Studies of classification of pornography, in particular, have suggested that we have yet to develop effective means of incorporating sexuality into our information, and particularly our classification paradigms (Spink, Ozmutlu & Lorence 2004, 119; Keilty 2012). And since traditional subject access aspires to the monolithic and the unambiguous, the objectives and strategies of information organization are rendered problematic when the important categories are sites of fluidity, ambiguity and resistance.

Queer theory does more than make classification and subject access more difficult; it makes us feel uneasy about our very desire for successful subject access. Certainly many LGBTQ users have pressing and specific information needs, particularly around awareness of services, particularly at the stage of coming out (Creelman & Harris 1990). However, the need to evolve and sustain an identity
can sometime be at odds with the very notion of finding answers. The very act of revealing what is hidden, which should be a liberating experience, can be rendered as a harsh and brutal “exposure”: the manifestation of a "paranoid" epistemology, in which revelation of what is hidden, tying as it does into mainstream fears of hidden alternatives, fails to offer “the nurturance needed for protection of queer possibilities” (Sedgwick 1997; Knabe, S. 2008, 218).

In the face of an information and social phenomenon that actually celebrates ambiguity, hiddenness, and inconsistency, information studies as a discipline must confront some uncomfortable questions. Do our systems and theories of information organization make adequate allowance for sexual desire and its importance in information use? Are our systems actually thwarting the very needs they strive to satisfy? And are the principles of access that underlie so many of our theories and principles shaped by the very forces of epistemological paranoia that queer theory strives to resist?

STRUCTURE OF THE PANEL
The panel will begin with a brief introduction that establishes the context of queer theory and its current position in information studies thought and practice. The ensuing discussion will be structured around three key questions (enumerated below) which will be posed in discussions running 15-20 minutes. Each of the panelists will be assigned one question, and will lead off by a 5-10-minute talk which addresses the question. Each of the other panelists will then respond to the talk, and the discussion will proceed with contributions from the floor. After all three questions have been addressed, the session will conclude with a 5-10-minute concluding discussion among the three panelists.

QUESTIONS AND SPEAKERS

1. Do mainstream information systems take sufficient account of sexuality?
   Patrick Keilty is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, as well as an Instructor at the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies. He is the co-editor of a major anthology of feminist and queer information studies (Dean & Keilty 2013), and his research investigates and critiques feminist and queer engagements with digital technology, with specific focus on database logic, visual culture, metadata, phenomenology, and sexual desire.

2. Do our principles of subject access thwart the needs of queer information users?
D. Grant Campbell is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario. He has published pieces on gay and lesbian approaches to subject headings (2000), queer approaches to classification (2004), and queer library history (2013). He is currently working on a study of Geoff Ryman’s novel, Was (1994), as an instance of queer transformation of two key concepts in subject analysis: synonym control and disambiguation.

3. Is there an alternative to the principle of “subject access”?
   Melissa Adler is Assistant Professor at the University of Kentucky. She conducts research in gender and sexuality, classification, interdisciplinary studies, the Library of Congress, and governmentality. She has published on the perversion of meaning in Library of Congress Subject Headings (2011) and the use of controlled terms and user tagging for transgender books (2009). She is currently completing a book manuscript which draws on the theories of Foucault and Deleuze to unearth ways in which perverse subjects are disciplined by and subvert classifications.

REFERENCES


