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*Outline available at: http://imlsproject.comm.ohio-state.edu/imls_papers/osu_adv.pdf

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Outline:

- I. Given a "Special" Population by Any Other Name
 - II. A Catalogue of Special Populations
 - III. The Essential Ideas Behind Special Populations
 - IV. The Dangers of Defining Subpopulations as Special
 - V. Arguments behind the Arguments
 - VI. How the Polarities Converge in Our Understandings of User SubGroups
 - VII. Adding Clarity about Communication to Our Understandings of Special Populations
 - VIII. Summary and Conclusions
- References

VII. Summary and Conclusions

Despite predictions that electronic resources will replace librarians, recent data present a different portrait. The demands on librarians to serve all manner of needs in actually going up. This phenomena converges with another -- the increased attention in policy/funding circles to the needs of special populations and the demands that libraries serve these special sub-groups.

While the attention to user studies in library and information science is often described as overwhelming us with a plethora of competing data points, perspectives and methods, in fact a close examination provides support for a central proposition - - there remains today as in the past an inherent tension in serving public needs between efficiency and effectiveness and between system mandates and individual user lives. Any attempt to serve special needs must address these inherent tensions.

Ironically, the current thrust of attention to the needs of sub-populations is in part seen as an answer to these tensions -- the idea being that we can isolate sub-populations and their needs, narrowing down the need context, and thus serve the needs better. To this end, much research attention is being directed to studying special populations identified by a wide variety of names.

Clearly, knowledge of specific a priori factors and contexts can be useful and to some extent are a necessary prerequisite to serving needs well. It can only go so far, however, because, as data have shown no amount of advance knowledge and no array of demographic, life-style, personality, sociological, and other variables can predict the moment of information seeking and use. The result actually ends up

privileging efficiency over effectiveness and system over individual. Necessarily, this bodes high communication failure.

In one sense, there is a synergy between the efforts of both practitioners and researchers to understand different sub-populations and the fact that these efforts have ended up by proliferating a bewildering array of ways of looking at users. That synergy is a symptom of our attempts to find more communicative and responsive ways of looking at individual information seeking and use and at the same time generalizing it to system service and design. The increased emphasis on examining specific kinds of information seeking and using behaviors seems the most promising avenue for the future.

We need to be aware, however, of the contradiction built into our simultaneous attentions to population sub-groups and information seeking activities. The former is essentially a non-communicative way of seeing people. The latter is communicative but it does not align with the hegemonies of power and policy.

In this sense, it can be said that the burden of being special is that those serving the special user attempt through procedure and practice to homogenize service. From a communication perspective, however, all users must be defined as special and the identification of that useful moment of system-user intersection must be seen as a communicatively iterative quest to which there is no end.

The primary thrust of this chapter has been to argue that we must find ways to introduce an inherently communicative methodology into research and practice focusing on users, and into the resulting design of library services, systems, and practices because it is only by doing so that we can make a dent in the tensions that now hold us captive. Bottom line, the question is not how to serve the needs of special populations but how to serve the needs of all users both efficiently and effectively and in ways that recognize the needs of individuals in their varying states of being and the needs of systems as they too evolve over time.

Understanding this communication mandate is especially important in the context of the increasing availability of a surfeit of information alternatives. Both expert commentary and evidence point to the need for information mediators even if we do not yet know how this vision might be realized.

When we do not address users communicatively, however, the difficulty is that the results of both research and practice too frequently support stereotypes. One such recent stereotype, for example, is that users prefer "google" to "libraries" but a close examination of some beginning evidence suggests this may be only true for some users in some situations under some conditions. In contrast, for some users in some situations under some conditions the library makes the important difference and the library is seen as helpful and as supportive as a good neighbor or loving family member. The question at hand is how to open the blinders on our vision so we can see users more realistically on their own terms and less as systems, or theories, want them to be.

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